



LOVE AND UNITY / THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

## **Water Baptism**

When we consider the doctrine of salvation, it is important to focus on the subject of water baptism. What is the purpose of baptism? Is baptism necessary for salvation? How about infant baptism? These and other questions are answered in the following article by Kurt Jurgensmeier.





## Water Baptism

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### Introduction

#### *Why Is This Topic Important?*

The subject of water baptism is important for several reasons. First of all, it is a commandment of Jesus Christ and an important part of His great commission. Christ said, “... go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). It is obvious that if we do not properly understand or practice baptism, we are in danger of neglecting a very important desire of our Lord and Savior.

*“Baptism points back to the work of God, and forward to the life of faith.”*

- J.A. Motyer

Understanding the Bible’s teaching concerning water baptism is also important because we have an obligation to ensure that new converts to Christ understand the biblical view of baptism and its significance to their relationship with Christ.

It would be very unfortunate for any believer to experience water baptism without really understanding its meaning. Finally, it is important to discuss this issue because there are a number of disagreements within Christianity related to baptism. Some of these are relatively minor, but others are extremely important and are worth some discussion.<sup>1</sup>

Section A will first discuss some introductory matters regarding the meaning of the word “baptism” and the different kinds of baptism in the New Testament (NT). Section B will cover specifically what the Bible teaches concerning the purpose, recipients, and method of water baptism. Finally, Section C will address some of the more controversial issues such as the place of baptism in salvation and infant baptism.

## A. The Biblical and Historical Background of Water Baptism

### 1. What does the word “baptism” mean?

The Greek root word from which the NT derives the word “baptism” is *bapto*. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (NIDNTT) says that: “In secular Greek *bapto* means (a) dip, (b) dip into a dye, and (c) draw water... In the LXX [Greek OT] *bapto* translates the OT Heb. *tabal*, dip... [In the NT] *bapto* only [has] the meaning “dip.”<sup>2</sup>

For example, *bapto* is used twice in John 13:26: “*Jesus answered, ‘It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped (bapto) it in the dish.’ Then, dipping (baptas) the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon.*” Webster’s defines “dip” as: “to plunge or immerse momentarily un-

der the surface (as of a liquid).”<sup>3</sup> It becomes obvious then that the root Greek word for baptism means to completely immerse or submerge something.

Greek words related to *bapto*, including the noun *baptisma* (“baptism”), and the verb *baptizo* (“to baptize”) are used over 100 times in the NT and clearly reflect the meaning of the root word (*bapto*: “to immerse”) in all cases except in three or four instances where the idea of Jewish “washing” is conveyed.

For example, we read of the Pharisees that “*When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash (rantisontai: lit. “sprinkle”). And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing (baptismos: “immersion”) of cups, pitchers and kettles*” (Mark 7:4; see also Luke 11:38; Hebrews 9:10). The fact that in this verse *rantisontai* is used in contrast with *baptismos* demonstrates the fact that the latter never meant sprinkling.

When “sprinkling” or “washing” was intended, the Greek language had many other words to choose from such as *rhantismos* (“sprinkling” e.g. Hebrews 9:19, 21), and *loutron* and *nipto* (“washing” e.g. Ephesians 5:26, Titus 3:5, Matthew 6:17). However, when the idea of “immersion” was intended, there was only one Greek word suitable: cognates of *bapto*. Even here concerning the washing of eating utensils, the NIDNTT points out that such “vessels were normally cleansed by immersing them in water.”<sup>4</sup>

So while, in rare instances, forms of *bapto* simply convey washing, it is clear that its primary meaning is immersion. This will be discussed further below in our discussion of the different modes of baptism.

## 2. Is there a cultural and historical background for baptism in the NT?

It is often suggested that both pagans and Jews were accustomed to the practice of baptism, but this is not at all certain. For sure, washing with water had medicinal and even religious purposes in both the Jewish and pagan cultures. But it seems unlikely that the kind of baptism that John the Baptist implemented was commonly practiced.

Some pagan mystery religions apparently had some initiatory rites that involved washing with water, but as Louis Berkhof has pointed out, “These heathen purifications have very little in common, even in their external form, with our Christian baptism. Moreover, it is a well established fact that the mystery religions did not make their appearance in the Roman Empire before the days of Paul.”<sup>6</sup>

The evidence for baptism among pre-Christian Jews is a little clearer, but not conclusive. It would seem there was a practice among some Jews in which Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism were required to not only be circumcised, but also to be baptized by full immersion. The parallels to Christian baptism are obvious, but it seems unlikely that John the Baptist and the Christians derived their idea of baptism from this Jewish ceremony. First of all, the first clear reference we have of the practice is in the Jewish *Mishna* [writings of rabbis] in a writing dated around A.D. 90,<sup>7</sup> some 60 years after the ministry of John the Baptist. To conclude that Jewish proselyte baptism was a widespread practice significantly before that time is pure speculation. In fact, we are sure that it was never a widespread practice.<sup>8</sup> Some also see a relationship between the practices of the Jewish sect in the Qumran community where the

*“A part of the act of baptism in the church of India is for the candidate to place his own hand on his head and say, “Woe is me if I preach not the gospel.”*

- E. Paul Hovey

*“Since Muslims equate believer’s baptism with salvation, they often begin to step up persecution when that occurs. And rightly so, for at that point, the follower of Christ breaks with his or her old community of faith and enters the emerging Body of Christ, the church.”*

*- Nik Ripken*

Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. It is true that they had a fairly complex system of ritual washings, but their relationship to Christian baptism is suspect as well.<sup>9</sup>

In the end, it is suggested here that, although John’s practice of initiating someone into a relationship with God by a one-time immersion in water was not absolutely unknown, it was a relatively unique practice in his day. Someone might ask, then, how did John know that immersion into water was to be the rite of initiation into the New Covenant? The best answer is obtained from remembering how Abraham knew that circumcision was to be the rite of initiation into the Old Covenant: God simply told him (Genesis 17:12). So when *“the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert”* (Luke 3:2), he was not only given a message and a mission, but a method for people to demonstrate repentance to God.

### **3. What was the purpose of John the Baptist’s baptizing ministry and how does it relate to baptism today?**

John’s baptism obviously has great significance to our study. It is repeatedly described as *“... a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”* (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; also see Matthew 3:11). It would seem that those who came to be baptized by John came for salvation. It was a salvation that was not complete until Christ had died and had baptized them *“with the Holy Spirit”* (Luke 3:16). Nonetheless, John’s baptism was the first step in receiving eternal life for these converts. They were obviously exercising repentance from their sin (Luke 3:10-14), exercising faith in the coming Messiah that John spoke of (Luke 3:15-16), and responding to the *“good news”* that John *“preached to them”* (Luke 3:18). And when we read that *“crowds”* (Luke 3:7) of *“The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins...”* (Mark 1:5), it becomes obvious that what we have here is nothing less than a massive, God-sent revival. These people were not baptized with the Spirit at this time, but they were certainly convicted by Him and, for many of them, that conviction eventually led to their full conversion to Christianity (see Acts 19:1-7).<sup>10</sup>

Like Christian baptism today, John’s baptism revealed that repentance and faith is the key to entering the Kingdom of God, and that a changed life, not an outward act, demonstrates you are accepted by God. However, there is one important difference between John’s baptism and Christian baptism today. Whereas the former was a symbolic act demonstrating the *first step* to spiritual conversion to Christ (i.e. repentance), Christian baptism is a symbolic act demonstrating a *completed* spiritual conversion to Christ.

### **4. What was the reason for, and significance of, Christ’s baptism?**

Matthew tells us: *“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ Jesus replied, ‘Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased’”* (Matthew 3:13-17).

The reason for Christ's baptism has been a topic of considerable discussion. Christ's somewhat obscure statement that it was *"to fulfill all righteousness"* doesn't automatically make the matter any clearer. Obviously, any suggestion that Christ came to repent of sin, as did the others being baptized by John, can be rejected immediately. Even John makes it clear that Christ had no such need. The best understanding of why Christ submitted to baptism is simply that the Father commanded Him, and Christ obeyed. It was simply an act of obedience on Christ's part (cf. John 4:34, 10:18; 15:10). God had set apart John the Baptist as a bridge between the Old and New Covenants. God sent His Son Jesus to be born under the Law (Galatians 4:4) and to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17). Therefore it was only fitting—a fulfilling of all righteousness—for Christ to affirm and participate in John the Baptist's ministry by being baptized by John.

*"A blameless life, a brilliant reputation, will not do. No, nor a Christian training either. 'Ye must be born again.' There must be a positive, actual, bona fide passage from death unto life.."*

- C. H. Mackintosh

Christ's baptism was significant in at least a couple of ways. First, it was recognized as the starting point of His ministry on earth. When the Apostles were choosing someone to replace Judas, Peter says, *"... it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us"* (Acts 1:21-22). Likewise, a Christian's baptism can be seen as the beginning of their lifelong service to God. Secondly, Christ's baptism set an obvious example for all Christians in submitting to baptism, leaving none of us any excuse for not submitting to it as well.

## 5. What is the baptism of the Spirit?

John the Baptist had told the crowds, *"I baptize you with water, but he (Christ) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit"* (Mark 1:8). What was John talking about? First of all, it should be noticed that John distinguished between being baptized with water and being baptized with the Holy Spirit. They are not the same thing. This is an important point to make in a discussion concerning water baptism because many misleading teachings concerning baptism are based on the mistake of using verses of Scripture that are describing the baptism of the Holy Spirit, not water baptism.<sup>11</sup> Many of these verses will be addressed in the course of our discussion.

So what is the baptism of the Holy Spirit if it is not water baptism? Simply put, the baptism of the Holy Spirit is the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit in a born again believer's life, occurring at the point of saving faith in Jesus Christ. In Ephesians we read: *"... you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance..."* (Ephesians 1:13-14). Here we see a description of this indwelling of the Holy Spirit and it is described as a permanent *"deposit guaranteeing our inheritance"* and it occurs when we have *"believed."* This verse also speaks of one of the many purposes of the baptism of the Holy Spirit: It *"includes"* us in Christ, making us a part of the spiritual body of Christ. Paul describes it this way in 1 Corinthians: *"For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body (of Christ)"* (1 Corinthians 12:13; see also Romans 6:1-5, Galatians 3:26-28).

Another purpose of the baptism with the Holy Spirit is spiritual regeneration. Paul writes to Titus: *"He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior"* (Titus 3:5-6). Obviously, what is being *"poured out on us gener-*

ously” is not water, but the Holy Spirit. And it is not water baptism that “saved us” or brought spiritual “*rebirth and renewal*,” but the drenching, washing, and indwelling “baptism” of the Holy Spirit.

This points us to the important relationship between water baptism and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Water baptism is simply a physical and outward act designed to symbolize the spiritual and inward indwelling and “baptism” of the Holy Spirit. They are obviously then, not the same thing, nor were they intended to occur at the same time (see, for example, Acts 10:47). The inward baptism of the Holy Spirit must occur first in order for the outward symbolism of water baptism to have any meaning. Any other practice would seem not only meaningless, but also potentially misleading. In addition, it becomes clear that there may be people that are baptized with the Holy Spirit, but haven’t been baptized with water. Such people are obviously saved, but simply have not yet obeyed a clear command of their Lord. Likewise, there may be people who are baptized with water, but have not received Christ as their personal savior, and therefore have not been baptized by the Holy Spirit. Such people are, unfortunately, not saved--only wet.

The Pentecostal idea that the baptism of the Spirit is manifesting with speaking in tongues is clearly denied by the Apostle Paul when he tells the Corinthians, “*For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink*” (1 Corinthians 12:13), and yet adds a few verses later that not everyone will speak in tongues (cf. v. 29).

## **B. A Biblical View of the Purpose, Recipients, and Method of Water Baptism**

### **1. What is the purpose and benefits of water baptism?**

#### *a. The biblical way of confessing saving faith*

Perhaps the most neglected, yet primary purpose for water baptism is its function as the biblical way in which people profess saving faith in Christ. This is why water baptism is so closely tied to salvation in the NT. Accordingly, when the Apostle Peter is asked by a crowd what they should do to be saved he replied, “*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins*” (Acts 2:38, emphasis mine). Likewise, Peter writes in his epistle: “*baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience*” (1 Peter 3:21; cf. Galatians 3:26-27; Colossians 2:12). Accordingly, Wayne Grudem writes concerning this passage:

“To be baptized rightly is to make such an appeal to God: ‘Please, God, as I enter this baptism which will cleanse my body outwardly I am asking you to cleanse my heart inwardly, forgive my sins, make me right before you.’ In this way baptism is an appropriate symbol for the beginning of the Christian life. Once we understand baptism in this way, we can appreciate why ‘Repent,

*“When you tell your servant to do something, and he cannot comprehend it, if he turns round and says, ‘Please, sir, what for?’ you are quite clear that he hardly understands the relation between master and servant. So when God tells me to do a thing, if I say, ‘What for?’ I have taken the place which Faith ought to occupy, which is that of simple obedience to whatever the Lord hath said. Baptism is commanded, and Faith obeys because it is commanded, and thus takes her proper place.”*

- C. H. Spurgeon

and be baptized ... for the forgiveness of your sins' (Acts 2:38) was an evangelistic command in the early church" (*Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, 163).

It would seem that the reason that baptism and repentance for salvation are so closely tied in Scripture is that water baptism is the biblical means by which we are to make a profession of saving faith. Another way of saying this is that the way that the "sinners prayer" functions in American Evangelicalism is how water baptism functioned in the NT. There is no example in the NT of the former to mark the moment in which a person professed saving faith; baptism fulfilled that function. This is precisely why for the vast majority of Christian history, baptism has been regarded as the moment someone is saved.

Obviously, a distinction between water baptism and salvation must be maintained in order to protect salvation by grace. Accordingly, we would separate a "sinner's prayer" from salvation as well. However, it is possible that in our desire to defend salvation by grace against those who claim baptism saves, we have separated them too much to the point that people feel comfortable saying they became a Christian years ago, but still haven't been baptized. This kind of response results from our having made baptism more of a post-conversion step of obedience instead of the biblical way in which believers profess their saving faith in Christ. Accordingly, we read in the *NIDNTT* entry on baptism:

"It is an embodiment of the gospel of grace and the supreme occasion for confessing it, hence the climactic point of the restoration of relations between God and the repentant sinner. Many of the confessional declarations in the epistles are thought to have originated as baptismal confessions (e.g. Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:6-11; Ephesians 4:4-6; Colossians 1:13-20), and from such beginnings the later creeds of Christendom developed" (*NIDNTT*, Beasley-Murray, I:147).

Likewise, commenting on Galatians 3:26-27, we read in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*:

"The two statements in Galatians 3:26 and 27 are complementary: verse 26 declares that believers are God's children "through faith," and verse 27 associates entry into God's family upon union with Christ, and Christ sharing his sonship with the baptized. It is an example of Paul's linking faith and baptism in such a way that the theological understanding of faith that turns to the Lord for salvation, and of baptism wherein faith is declared, is one and the same" ("*Baptism*" 2.1).

*b. Water baptism is a physical symbol of our spiritual salvation.*

A common mistake in discussions on baptism is to suggest that it has one primary meaning. For example, those who claim that pouring or sprinkling are the biblical means of water baptism, support their view by claiming that baptism is to primarily symbolize a washing away of our sins. Of course, this is one of the spiritual realities that water baptism conveys, but not the only one.

Spiritual rebirth is another spiritual reality that baptism symbolizes. It was pointed out earlier that the inward baptism of the Holy Spirit accomplishes the spiritual regeneration that occurs in our life when God brings us into a saving relationship with Him. Romans 6:2-4 provides a good description of this spiritual reality that is demonstrated in the physical act of water baptism: "*We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized*

***"Before an individual can be saved, he must first learn that he cannot save himself."***

***- M. R. DeHaan***



***“If a person is already justified and has sins forgiven eternally at the point of saving faith, then baptism is not necessary for forgiveness of sins nor for the bestowal of new spiritual life. Baptism, then, is not necessary for salvation. But it is necessary if we are to be obedient to Christ, for He commanded baptism for all who believe in Him.”***

*- Wayne Grudem*

*into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”*

It is common to suggest that Paul is only speaking of spiritual baptism here and not water. However, in light of our discussion above about how closely tied water baptism and the confession of saving faith was in the early Church, it is better to assume Paul is not making such a distinction. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that water baptism is to symbolize the fact that we have “*passed out of death into life*” (John 5:24).

Indeed, water baptism is absolutely chock-full of symbolic meaning that points to the most vital and valuable truths concerning our eternal salvation.

For example, there is much to be said about the act of going under the water. First of all, it speaks of God’s judgment and punishment of His Son. Water has been a symbol of God’s wrath since the days of Noah (Genesis 6:17). When Christ told the disciples “*But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!*” (Luke 12:50), He was speaking of the wrath of Almighty God that was soon to be inflicted on Him for us! And our own submersion into the water is a reminder that all of the wrath, punishment, and condemnation that God would ever have for our sin has already been completely spent on His Son. There is none left for us. God only has love for us now because Christ subjected Himself to a “baptism” of God’s wrath in our place.

Going under the water is certainly also a reminder of Christ’s death and burial. The author of physical life and the giver of eternal life died when He took our sins upon Him. Likewise, when we are born again by the Spirit of God, we, too, die. Remember what Paul said? “*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live...*” (Galatians 2:20). Those of us who have been born again know that our conversion to Christ was a very real death to our old selves. Much of our old thinking, old fears, old grudges, and old desires passed away when we were baptized with the Holy Spirit. Indeed, when Christ comes into our lives we are “*... a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*” (2 Corinthians 5:17). We have literally been recreated by God into a different creature. We are not even the same species of human anymore, for a human with the living God dwelling in them is a different animal altogether. So yes, there is a very real death that occurs in our salvation experience and being submerged in water is a very apt demonstration of that dying.

And thank God we are not to be left under the water! We should not forget that at that moment in water baptism the person is virtually in a place that would become their grave if they were left there. And just as surely as water can bring physical death, we too would be spiritually dead if left in our sins. But hallelujah! Christ rose from His grave! Because of His resurrection, we are raised from our spiritual death to eternal life! Submersion under water is not the end of water baptism because we too are raised and removed from not only something that could cause our physical death, but from that which symbolizes God’s wrath and our spiritual death in sin. Thank God that we not only physically come out of the water, but also out of the sin, death, and judgment that the water symbolizes.

Another vital truth, symbolized in water baptism by immersion, is found in Christ's words to Nicodemus: "... *I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit*" (John 3:5). It will be demonstrated below that Christ is not speaking of water baptism at all here, but rather our physical birth from our mother's womb. But there would seem to be some meaningful symbolism here as well for water baptism. Although it's not necessary to describe the details of what happens at our physical birth, it is important to be reminded that we are essentially *born out of water*. That is what we are surrounded by for the first nine months of our life. Likewise, coming out of the water of our baptism is symbolic of our being born again, not of water this time, but of the Spirit. Water baptism is a declaration to the world that God has granted us a second chance at life, to live the way we were supposed to and want to, because we know we "... *have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry*" (1 Peter 4:3). Indeed, the spiritual regeneration that water baptism symbolizes not only grants us life with God forever, but a new life now.

***"We may never be martyrs but we can die to self, to sin, to the world, to our plans and ambitions. That is the significance of baptism; we died with Christ and rose to new life."***

**- Vance Havner**

Finally, being immersed and raised from water obviously symbolizes the spiritual cleansing and complete forgiveness that occurs with our conversion to Christ. Ananias told Paul after his conversion: "*And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name*" (Acts 22:16). It will be demonstrated further below that water baptism has nothing to do with God's decision to forgive our sins. Paul certainly didn't think his baptism did, or he would have included it in the gospel he preached. But there is no doubt that Paul's baptism was a very helpful and meaningful experience to the man that a few days earlier had been "*the worst of sinners*" (1 Timothy 1:16). Saul of Tarsus was blessed by this symbolic "*washing...and renewing*" (Titus 3:5) of his past record of sin that is expressed through water baptism. This is obviously another reason why God chose this particular practice to mark the beginning of a new Christian's life: water baptism communicates complete and total forgiveness.

Someone might ask, "If water baptism is only a *symbolic demonstration* of God's saving grace, and not necessarily an actual *means* of His saving grace, how does it practically benefit us?" First of all, we would suggest that water baptism was viewed in the early Church as a means of grace much like Evangelical Christianity views the "sinner's prayer." There is no promise of salvation in the mere act of baptism just as there is no guarantee that someone who prays a certain prayer will be saved. However, these are means through which people do confess a saving faith to God which saves them.

In addition, there are many other benefits in the act of baptism. The most obvious way in which water baptism brings real benefit into our life is the same way the Lord's Supper benefits us. Jesus simply said, "*do this in remembrance of Me*" (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25). Essentially, the Lord's Supper is a means that God has ordained for our consistent reminder of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ for our sins (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:26) and that graphic reminder can be expected to strengthen our understanding and appreciation of our salvation whenever it is practiced. The same is true of water baptism. Also, for believers who witness a baptism, it reminds and increases their understanding of *their* own salvation. Finally, baptism is a public demonstration to non-believers of the truth of the gospel, and

as such, a public baptism is often used by God to bring people to salvation in Christ.

*c. Water baptism is the physical demonstration of being identified with Christ*

Romans 6:2-4 discussed above certainly conveys the idea that through water baptism we are identified with Christ. Paul says, “*all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were therefore buried with him through baptism.*” This has several meanings. First, as described here, God accepts Christ’s death as our own death, therefore paying the penalty of our sin.

Our identification with Christ also means we belong to Him. This is illustrated in a significant manner in Paul’s handling of the divisions in the Corinthian church. He cites its members as saying, “I belong to Paul,” “I belong to Apollos,” “I belong to Cephas (= Peter),” “I belong to Christ” (1 Cor 1:12). Paul then asks, “Has Christ been apportioned to any single group among you? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Thus, Paul strongly suggests that to be baptized in the name of someone is to belong to them.

*d. Water baptism is a public reflection of our membership into Christ’s Church.*

As noted above, baptism symbolizes our belonging and membership in Christ (cf. Galatians 3:26-27; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13). Accordingly, we are placed into a universal, eternal, and privileged family when the Spirit indwells us. Water baptism is an outward symbolic expression of this. By being baptized as all of our brothers and sisters in Christ have, it communicates our desire to join them and identify ourselves with the most privileged group of people on earth, the people of God. And the cheers and hugs they respond with afterward reflect their acceptance of you into that very honored circle. Your willingness to be baptized puts other Christians, particularly those in your local church, on notice that you have been born again and that you want to follow Christ with them. The local church, by accepting your willingness to be baptized, is agreeing to accept you into the fellowship of Christ, with all of its responsibilities and privileges.

*e. Water baptism is a public statement of our commitment to the Lordship of Christ.*

By noting that the early Church viewed baptism as primarily a physical means by which one expresses saving faith, it certainly also operates as a public statement of our commitment to the Lord Jesus. Something, of course, that is practically the same as confessing saving faith.

It was noted earlier that Christ’s baptism was a demonstration of His obedience to the Father. Because Christ then commanded all of His followers to be baptized as He was, it is an act of obedience for us as well. But it is more than a one-time act of obedience. It is a declaration on our part that we intend to follow Jesus Christ for the rest of our life. By obeying Him in baptism, we are confessing and proclaiming Him as our only Master and Lord. The benefit here is essentially the same as any other time we obey our Lord. It is not necessarily an easy thing to publicly share your testimony, proclaim your commitment to Christ, and get dunked under water. But there is always a sense of abundant joy and peace when one is baptized, and it is a reminder to us all that we never lose by obeying Christ, even in something as simple (although meaningful) as water baptism.

***“All our salvation consists in the manifestation of the nature, life and spirit of Jesus Christ in our inward new man. This alone is Christian redemption, this alone delivers from the guilt and power of sin, this alone redeems and renews.”***

*- William Law*

## 2. When should someone be baptized?

While we suggested above that water baptism was understood to be the way in which people professed saving faith, the early Church understood that such faith must be present in order for baptism to have any meaning. This is clearly demonstrated in all of the NT examples and exhortations regarding baptism.<sup>13</sup> The Book of Acts gives us several examples. Concerning the very first Christian baptism we read: *“Those who accepted his (Peter’s gospel) message were (then) baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day”* (Acts 2:41). Philip’s ministry in Samaria is similarly described: *“But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, (then) they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and (then) was baptized”* (Acts 8:12-13). Likewise, we read also that, *“... many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and (then) were baptized”* (Acts 18:8). In addition, the conversions and baptisms of both the Ethiopian eunuch and Paul seemed to have followed the same pattern (Acts 8:35- 39; 9:17-18).

*“God’s people should be baptized because God commanded it, not because some church requires it.”*

- John R. Rice

The presence of saving faith in water baptism is illustrated when Peter told a crowd: *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins”* (Acts 2:38). It can first be pointed out that only someone who has saving faith in Jesus Christ, could obey Peter’s instruction to *“be baptized... in the name of Jesus Christ.”* To do anything *“in the name of Jesus Christ”* is to be already identified with Him as your Lord and Savior. So Peter understands that only those who had *“accepted his message”* in faith (cf. 2:41, 37) and responded to his call to sincerely *“repent”* could indeed *“be baptized... in the name of Jesus Christ”* because they already belonged to Jesus Christ.

Therefore, genuine faith in Christ is always to accompany water baptism. Accordingly, a person should demonstrate a clear understanding of the gospel message, as well as a committed faith in Christ, before being baptized.

It should be noted that a willingness to obey Christ’s command to be baptized is an important indicator of the authenticity of the person’s faith. To be baptized, new believers need to come to a point where they truly desire to publicly confess their born again experience, their commitment to Christ, and their desire to serve and fellowship with other believers. The prospect of making a public declaration of such things may cause a good deal of apprehension in some, but these fears must be overcome by their love for God and desire to obey Him. No doubt it will be the first of many more times that obeying God will be a scary thing. When baptism is an act of trust and obedience, done not out of compulsion, but out of conviction and sincere desire, it is then that it is pleasing to our Lord.

## 3. How should someone be baptized?

At the actual baptism, it is suggested that new believers share their stories of how they were converted to Christ. Give them a list of questions to answer, like:

1. What was your life like before getting saved?
2. What circumstances, people, etc. did God use to bring you to Christ?
3. How has your life changed since being converted to Christ?

***“Christ is the Son of God. He died to atone for men’s sin, and after three days rose again. This is the most important fact in the universe. I die believing in Christ.”***

*- Watchman Nee, (note found under his pillow, in prison, at his death).*

#### 4. Why do you want to get baptized?

Their explanation here should reflect a desire to obey and follow Christ and to commit themselves to the local church as described above. Biblically, any true believer can baptize another true believer, and the Bible gives us no indication otherwise. It is perfectly fine, in fact, if the person or persons who were instrumental in their salvation have the privilege of baptizing them. However, because water baptism would seem to be the biblical “rite of initiation” into not only the universal Church, but the local one as well, some have seen the value in having the local church leadership perform baptisms.

In performing the actual baptism, the person should be immersed completely under the water and publicly baptized “*in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matthew 28:19), as Christ instructed. Obviously, there should be plenty of room for the whole church to gather, and the whole church should gather. A new baby brother or sister has been born into the family of God and all should be there to witness this advancement of the great commission and to offer their affirmation to the new sibling in Christ.

## C. Other Questions About Water Baptism

### 1. Is baptism necessary for salvation?

Some churches<sup>14</sup> believe, teach, and practice the conviction that water baptism is essential to someone’s eternal salvation. In other words, if someone is not baptized in water they will not go to Heaven, but rather, will be sent to Hell. This is, of course, contrary to the requirements of God’s New Covenant with humanity and the gospel of grace. The NT says plainly, “*This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe*” (Romans 3:22), “*... God credits righteousness apart from works*” (Romans 4:6), and “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast*” (Ephesians 2:8-9). God could not be clearer. Any act or “work” for which we could take credit, can have absolutely nothing to do with our righteous standing before God. Any other teaching is “*... a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all.*” And even if “*an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the...*” gospel of pure grace apart from works, they are in danger of being “*... eternally condemned!*” (Galatians 1:6-8).

In general, we think that much confusion has arisen from the fact that water baptism was the accepted means by which someone professed saving faith. It was the “sinner’s prayer” of the early Church. Accordingly, some verses could give the impression that water baptism saves people, just like an Evangelical Christian may say that a “sinner’s prayer” saves people. In reality, we know that the physical act is an outward expression, not a substitute, for the spiritual reality of saving faith that really saves.

How do we then handle the NT verses that tie salvation and water baptism so closely together (cf. Mark 16:15-18; Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:20-21; Acts 22:16, etc.)? We need to hold two NT truths together: 1) Salvation is purely by God’s grace and not our works, and 2) Water baptism is the NT way of expressing our saving faith.

Accordingly, when Christ recognized the saving faith of the thief on the cross, he promised him salvation, even though he could not be baptized (cf. Luke 23:39-43).

Likewise, Paul makes it clear that water baptism is not essential to salvation when he tells the Corinthians: *“I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius.... For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.... For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”* (1 Corinthians 1:14, 17-18). Elsewhere he writes *“... the gospel ... (that) is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes...”* (Romans 1:16), not water baptism. That is what Paul believed, and if we are to avoid serious and damaging doctrinal error, we must believe, proclaim, and practice the same.

*“Eternal life is not a reward for effort; it is a gift to those who trust Christ.”*

*- J. Vernon McGee*

While understanding the NT purpose for water baptism in the process of salvation helps to clarify the meaning of verses used to claim it is essential to salvation, there is an additional passage that should be addressed. In the Gospel of John, chapter 3, we read: *“Jesus declared (to Nicodemus), ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’ ‘How can a man be born when he is old?’ Nicodemus asked. ‘Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again’”* (John 3:3-7).

Some contend that when Christ says *“born of water,”* He means Christian water baptism. And then they conclude that water baptism is essential to being *“born again.”* However, although water baptism and the baptism of the Spirit are at times mentioned together (Matthew 3:11; Acts 1:5; Romans 6:1-11), Christ makes it clear that he is speaking of a person’s physical birth as a baby, not water baptism. His statement that *“Flesh gives birth to flesh”* in verse 6 is synonymous with being *“born of water”* in verse 5, just as the *“Spirit giv(ing) birth to the spirit”* is synonymous with being *“born of... the Spirit.”* So the meaning of being *“born of water”* is defined by the meaning of the statement, *“Flesh gives birth to flesh.”* And the clearest understanding of that is that Christ is talking about a person’s physical birth. This interpretation is strengthened by Nicodemus’s statement that a person, *“... cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”* All Christ is saying is that only people who are physically created by God, and then spiritually born again by the Spirit of God, will be saved.

In conclusion, none of the verses used to teach that the mere physical act of water baptism results in salvation can be used in this way. At the same time, however, these verses remind us of the important part that water baptism plays in giving the person the opportunity to declare and confess the saving faith they have in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

## **2. Should infants be baptized?**

Infant baptism is practiced religiously among both Roman Catholics and many Protestant denominations including Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Reformed churches.

Roman Catholic theologians insist on what is called “baptismal regeneration” and argue that the sacrament actually spiritually converts the infant, putting them in a saving relationship with God. This will

not be addressed here, but it is suggested that such an idea is refuted in answering the previous question above. Although Protestant paedobaptists (paedo referring to infants) claim to deny the idea of “baptismal regeneration,” they insist that a baptized infant is a member of the “covenant community” of God. And this is the focal point of their theological argument for the practice. Unfortunately for our purposes (i.e. trying to wrap up what is supposed to be a rather short paper on baptism) the arguments that paedobaptists have developed are rather complex. Still, an attempt will be made here to honestly, but concisely, represent their position, and then to suggest why one might believe that the Scriptures teach otherwise.

Essentially, the theological argument for infant baptism under the New Covenant is based on the fact that infants were circumcised under the Old Covenant. Louis Berkhof in defense of the paedobaptist position in his *Systematic Theology* would seem to lay out their primary line of theological reasoning as follows:

“This [Abrahamic] covenant is still in force and is essentially identical with the ‘new covenant’ of the present dispensation... By appointment of God infants shared in the benefits of the [Abrahamic] covenant, and therefore received circumcision as a sign and seal... In the new dispensation baptism is by divine authority substituted for circumcision as the initiatory sign and seal of the covenant of grace... if children received the sign and seal of the [Abrahamic] covenant in the old dispensation, the presumption is that they surely have a right to receive it in the new [covenant]....”<sup>18</sup>

In response, it is true that circumcision was the sign of the Old Covenant and that baptism is the sign of the New Covenant. But does it follow that because infants were circumcised under the Old that infants should be baptized under the New?

Christian baptism and Jewish circumcision have some important similarities and some important differences between them. The clearest indication that they are in any way related is Paul’s words in Colossians: “*In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead*” (2:11-12). Accordingly, one fairly obvious similarity between OT circumcision and NT baptism was that they both were intended by God to set His people apart from the rest of humankind. It was circumcision, no doubt, that marked the Jews as the people of the Old Covenant and the rite was commanded of all those who were included in that covenant. The same is true of water baptism for those who partake in the New Covenant. So both practices were ordained by God as a physical demonstration of being set apart by God and belonging to Him.

However, there are some important differences between circumcision and water baptism because they represent two very different covenants. Under the Old Covenant, a person was considered set apart by God simply by being born into (or attached to) a Jewish family. The only reason infant circumcision had meaning under the Old Covenant was because that infant actually was included in the “covenant community” simply by its physical birth as a Jew and its circumcision. But all of this symbolizes things that now have no relationship to any characteristics of the New Covenant. We are not included in the New Covenant by being born into a Christian family, or having some religious ceremony performed

*“Infant baptism when practiced can be no more than an expression of the faith and hope of the parents that their child will ultimately be saved.”*

*- Lewis Sperry Chafer*

on our behalf. Entrance into a covenant with God now is through an actual (not an infant's presumed and possibly future) saving faith. Therefore, it is suggested here that infant baptism unfortunately symbolizes many things that are directly opposed to the gospel and such a practice has no place now that the Old Covenant has been abolished, and we live under the New.

This is, no doubt, why Paul fought so consistently against the circumcision of believers. In the OT, God commanded circumcision regardless of the spiritual condition of the person (Genesis 17:10-13, 23). Such a practice communicates an acceptance by God based on a physical act instead of an exercise of personal faith. But the gospel Paul preached involved a "*circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit*" (Romans 2:29). It is suggested here that Paul would deny the need or right for an infant to be baptized on the same grounds he denied the need for circumcision.

Further arguments for infant baptism are found in four verses. First, in Acts 2:39, Peter tells a Jewish crowd, "*The promise (of salvation) is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.*" It would seem that paedobaptists interpret this verse as saying that Peter is promising that the children of Christians will be saved. However, Peter explains that the promise is more specifically "*for all whom the Lord our God will call*" which will not include all children of Christian parents. It is suggested here that the paedobaptist's interpretation of Peter's words, and the practice of infant baptism as well, is based on presumption. There is no promise at all that the infant of Christian parents will be saved in the future, and a baptism that is to symbolize such a presumption would seem better left undone.

Second, in Matthew 19:14, "*Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.'*" The paedobaptist interpretation of these words is that Christ regarded these "*little children*" to be assured of future salvation and as such, presently included in "*the kingdom of heaven.*"<sup>19</sup> First of all, Jesus is saying no such thing, but rather, is making the point that those who exercise saving faith like little children exercise childlike trust, will enter the Kingdom. In addition, although it is admitted that "*little children*" may exercise saving faith and be converted to Christ, it is insisted that such children would be saved by that faith, not by virtue of simply being children, or even children of Christian parents.

Third, Paul tells the Corinthians that a believer's unbelieving spouse and his or her children are "*sanctified*" and made "*holy*" by the presence of the believer (1 Corinthians 7:14). Paedobaptist attempt to use this verse to insist again that the children of a believer will be saved. First of all, Paul cannot be saying that the unbelieving spouse and children of a believer are, or will be saved, simply because of their relationship with the believer. This again not only violates the requirements for being accepted by God under the New Covenant, but such a conclusion is flatly denied when two verses later Paul asks the believing spouses, "*How do you know, (believing) wife, whether you will save your (unbelieving) husband? Or, how do you know, (believing) husband, whether you will save your (unbelieving) wife*" (1 Corinthians 7:16)? The answer is that they cannot know, and the same obviously applies to their children.

It would seem the best interpretation of Paul's use of "*sanctified (hagiazō)*" and "*holy (hagios)*" can have nothing to do with eternal salvation, but rather temporary Christian influence on the household. These words are not invariably used to refer to people possessing eternal salvation, but are also used,

***"Salvation is a personal matter. It can never be enjoyed or experienced by proxy."***

***- Erling C. Olsen***



***“God has no grandchildren.”***

*- Unknown*

for example, to describe things that are set apart for God’s purposes (e.g. Matthew 4:5; 7:6; 24:15). The only influence that a believer could expect to have in such a situation is possibly to influence the family’s values and lifestyle, maybe even making it seem to be a Christian family. It is suggested that it is merely this “sanctifying” influence that would make the family different from wholly pagan families, of which Paul was speaking.

Finally, an argument for infant baptism has to do with the NT descriptions of “households” being baptized. These include the households of Stephanus (1 Corinthians 1:16), the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:30-33), and Lydia (Acts 16:14-15). Paedobaptists contend that when the Bible says that whole households were baptized, we are to assume that infants in those families were baptized as well. However, in two of the three household baptisms in the NT this is clearly not the case. In regards to the family of Stephanas, it should be pointed out that at the end of 1 Corinthians Paul says, “... *the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints*” (1 Corinthians 16:15). The whole household of Stephanus were born again believers and therefore the whole household was baptized. Obviously, no infants could be described as “converts” or those who “*have devoted themselves to the service of the saints*” and the paedobaptist can find no biblical support here.

Likewise, regarding the household of the Philippian jailer, Luke is careful to point out that “*The jailer... was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family*” (Acts 16:34). So again, we understand why “...*all his family were baptized*” (Acts 16:33), and again the passage denies the presence of infants for they could not have “... *come to believe in God... (as the jailer’s) whole family*” did. In the case of Lydia, there is no indication that there were any infants in her household, or even that she was married. In conclusion then, the fact that households are described as being baptized in the NT offers no support for the paedobaptist position. In fact, there is no instance or mention at all in Scripture of infant baptism, but only the baptism of those who have placed personal saving faith in Christ.<sup>20</sup>

The arguments developed by paedobaptists assume that God still works with humanity in family units just as He did with the nation of Israel. However, they would seem to ignore how Christ described the effect of the implementation of the New Covenant and the preaching of the gospel: “*Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man’s enemies (not necessarily his fellow Christians) will be the members of his own household*” (Matthew 10:34-36). God deals with individuals now, and we have no indication whatsoever in the NT that being born into a Christian family will make someone a Christian themselves.

Obviously any historical arguments for infant baptism are considerably less valuable than biblical ones, but even here our paedobaptist brothers and sisters do not have a convincing case. Even the paedobaptist theologian Geoffrey W. Bromiley admits that:

“First, there is no decisive evidence for a common Jewish practice of infant baptism in apostolic times. Second, the patristic statements [of Church Fathers] linking infant baptism with the apostles are fragmentary and unconvincing in the earlier stages. Third, examples of believer’s baptism are common [actually, by far the majority] in the first centuries, and a continuing, if suppressed, witness has always been borne to this requirement. Fourth, the development of infant baptism seems to be linked with the incursion of pagan notions and practices [including

Origen's and Augustine's insistence that infant baptism removed "original sin"]. Finally, there is evidence of greater evangelistic incisiveness and evangelical purity of doctrine where this form of baptism [believer's] is recognized to be the baptism of the NT." <sup>21</sup>

So it would seem that infant baptism, although practiced by many well-meaning Christians, cannot be supported on any biblical or historical evidence. It only remains to say that none of these arguments against infant baptism are meant to dissuade anyone from practicing what is commonly called "baby dedication," and although such a practice may not be clearly sanctioned by the Bible, it can be a good and meaningful event.

*"We must not suppose that even if we succeeded in making everyone nice, we should have saved their souls."*

- C.S. Lewis

### 3. What about other methods of water baptism such as sprinkling or pouring?

Many churches and denominations believe that simply sprinkling or pouring water on a person is the biblically prescribed way to perform baptism. Others insist that only baptism by immersion is acceptable. However, the fact that no water baptism in the NT is described in enough detail to dogmatically claim a particular method, should warn people in both camps of their potential misplaced legalism.

However, while it may be admitted that the Bible does not clearly prescribe the method of baptism, there are several indications that immersion was the preferred method in the early Church. The clearest argument for this is in the meaning of "baptism" itself as described above. There is no doubt that its primary meaning was immersion, and if the meaning of the Greek word *baptizo* were not embroiled in the debate concerning the method of Christian baptism, there would probably be no controversy on the meaning of the word. With that said, instances can be found in both Greek literature and even Scripture (cf. Luke 11:38) where "baptism" simply means to wash, and immersion is not specified. Therefore, while the meaning of *baptizo* is a strong argument for immersion, it is not a decisive one.

Likewise, while examples of baptisms in the NT seem to imply immersion, they do not certainly do so. For example, we read in John 3:23 that, "John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptized." It would seem that the need for "plenty of water" would indicate that John was immersing people, but that would not have to be the case. Likewise, concerning Christ's baptism, we read in Mark 1:10 that, "As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove." The wording here might also suggest immersion, but it could simply mean Jesus was leaving the river. Finally, in Acts 8:38 we read, "Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him." It could be suggested that if Philip had thought that sprinkling or simply pouring water on the eunuch was sufficient for Christian baptism, there would not have been a need for both of them to go "down into the water." However, it is conceivable that they stood in the water while Philip poured the water on the eunuch. Additional support for this is that going "down into the water" certainly cannot be interpreted as immersion itself as that would mean Philip was immersed as well.

Perhaps the clearest biblical evidence that the preferred method of baptism is immersion is to remember what it is to symbolize. We have already noted that proponents of pouring or sprinkling make the mistake of claiming that the sacrament is to primarily or even exclusively portray the washing away of sins or the pouring out of the Spirit. If this were so, merely sprinkling or pouring of water may be

*"If you have not chosen the Kingdom of God first, it will in the end make no difference what you have chosen instead."*

- William Law

sufficient. However, we have pointed out several equally important things regarding our salvation that baptism is to symbolize that sprinkling and pouring would not convey. The idea of spiritual death, regeneration, and resurrection are equally important truths that are to be conveyed by water baptism. In addition, baptism is described as being baptized "in Christ" (not with Him), also suggesting immersion. Sprinkling or pouring water on someone does not adequately convey any of these truths.

Immersion even conveys the idea of "washing" better than other methods as well. Obviously, baptism certainly involves the idea of "washing (Acts 22:16, Titus 3:5)," but a *total* and *complete* washing is intended by the term, not simply getting a little wet here and there. It was noted above that the term often means to dip something into dye. Sprinkling or pouring dye over something will not produce the desired effect and will leave certain parts unchanged by the dye. Likewise, water baptism is

intended to affect every part of our physical body, just like the spiritual baptism it symbolizes effects every part of our life.

Accordingly, it is suggested that immersion is the best method by which all that is to be symbolized in baptism can be portrayed, and that other methods would not at all symbolize some of these important elements.

It is interesting to note that the view suggested here is supported by a very important document from the early Church. While the method of baptism may not be prescribed with certainty in Scripture, the *Didache*, written around A.D. 70 specifically addresses this. While not eventually accepted as Scripture, it is believed to reflect the early beliefs and practices of the Church. On the subject of baptism it reads:

"Now concerning baptism, baptize as follows: after you have reviewed all these things, baptize 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' in running water. But if you have no running water, then baptize in some other water; and if you are not able to baptize in cold water, then do so in warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times 'in the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit'" (ch. 7).

To baptize in "running water" or "in some other water" would clearly seem to mean immersion, as it is contrasted with pouring. Therefore, this is practically decisive evidence that the preferred method of baptism in the early Church was immersion. However, even here, practical considerations are respected and legalism is avoided. There are no doubt circumstances in which immersion may not be advisable or possible and the early Church allowed for that.

#### **4. What is the baptism for the dead (1 Corinthians 15:29)?**

In Paul's defense of a bodily and future resurrection of believers, he tells the Corinthians: "*Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?*" (1 Corinthians 15:29). What in the world is Paul talking about? The answer: Nobody knows. Gordon Fee, Professor of New Testament at Regent College claims that "at least forty different solutions have been suggested" to explain what Paul was talking about.<sup>23</sup> After a lengthy discussion, he suggests that,

“the most likely options are (a) that it reflects some believers being baptized for others who either were or were on their way to becoming believers when they died (e. g. as in 11:30), but had never been baptized; or (b) that it reflects the concern of members of households for some of their own number who died before becoming believers. What they may have expected to gain from it is not quite clear...”<sup>24</sup>

Still, it would seem that we need not be overly concerned with understanding exactly what Paul was talking about. Such a practice is nowhere commanded in the Scriptures nor described. Fee adds: “There is no historical or biblical precedent for such baptism. The NT is otherwise completely silent about it; there is no known practice in any of the other churches nor in any orthodox Christian community in the centuries that follow; nor are there parallels or precedents in pagan religion... This is an especially strong argument against the Mormons, e.g., who would justify their practice on alleged “biblical” grounds (which is of some interest in itself since the exegesis of the biblical text generally holds very little interest for them)...This complete silence in all other sources [outside of 1 Corinthians 15:29] is the sure historical evidence that, if such a practice existed in fact, it did so as something purely eccentric among some in the Corinthian community”<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

Water baptism is an important practice to understand. Not only did Christ command it as part of making disciples, He Himself was baptized and expects all of His followers to do the same. Yet it need not be a burden for the true follower of Christ as it communicates, reminds, and symbolizes the most wonderful truths known to humanity. Through immersion, water baptism not only speaks of the washing away and forgiveness of our sins, but the spiritual death, regeneration, and resurrection that we share with Christ and that results in not only a new life now, but eternal life in Heaven. Obviously such a practice only has meaning if the inward spiritual realities of salvation have occurred in the person being baptized. It is hoped that controversies concerning the purpose (is it necessary for salvation?), the recipients (should infants be baptized?), and the mode (is sprinkling okay?) of water baptism will not be allowed to obscure what was intended by Christ to be a beautiful and meaningful act of obedience that symbolizes His own act of obedience that resulted in our eternal life.

*“A little faith will bring your soul to heaven, but a lot of faith will bring heaven to your soul.”*

*- Dwight L. Moody*

\*All Scripture quotations in this article are from the New International Version.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Apart from the debates regarding immersion and infant baptism, the Concise Dictionary of Christianity in America (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), states that “For the Evangelical Free Church of America, baptism is optional, not required for local church membership. The Salvation Army and the Society of Friends [Quakers] do not practice water baptism at all.” (p. 33).

<sup>2</sup> New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 1:144-5.

<sup>3</sup> Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1986), 357.

<sup>4</sup> NIDNTT, Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 622.

<sup>7</sup> George Beasley-Murray, Baptism in the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 24.

<sup>8</sup> George Beasley-Murray, in his classic volume on baptism, points out that, “If proselyte baptism was a universally accepted institution in Judaism before the Christian era, how are we to explain the fact that there is not one clear testimony to it in pre-Christian writings and its complete absence of mention from the writings of Philo [Jewish philosopher and prolific writer living until c. 45 A. D.], Josephus [influential Jewish historian living until c. 100 A. D.], and the Bible, particularly the New Testament? The silence of these authorities is the more unexpected when it is recalled how interested they all were in the relations of Jews to Gentiles” (19). Beasley-Murray points out also that there are records of Gentile conversions to Judaism at this time that only mention circumcision, not baptism. (20). It is suggested that the evidence for this Jewish practice is commonly made too much of for what would seem to be the following reasons: 1) It attracts the intellectual curiosity of scholars, 2) It attracts those vying for the method of immersion in Christian baptism because when Jewish proselyte baptism occurred it was by full immersion, and 3) It attracts those arguing for infant baptism as it seems this also occurred in the practice. Still, the evidence for it would seem too little, and too late, to have any significant bearing on our understanding of Christian baptism.

<sup>9</sup> Beasley-Murray quotes H. H. Rowley as concluding from his study that, “There is not a single feature of John’s baptism for which there is the slightest reason to go to Qumran to look for the source”. (15)

<sup>14</sup> The “churches” in mind are primarily included in an association of churches called the Churches of Christ. However, it is not true that all churches in this association believe that baptism is required for salvation.

<sup>18</sup> Berkhof, 633-4.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Robert L. Reymond, professor of Systematic Theology at Knox Theological Seminary who in his recent New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998) insists that Christ is saying that “the kingdom of God belongs to... little children... who have covenant parents.” (941). There would seem to be no recognition that only born again people, saved by faith, are

members of Christ’s Kingdom. At this point, we might also ask our paedobaptist brothers and sisters why are infants and/or small children excluded from the Lord’s Supper, if they are, in fact, members of the “New covenant community”? This author has not found a paedobaptist response to this in the three Reformed systematic theologies, six books, and three scholarly articles that were consulted and that argued for infant baptism.

<sup>21</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “Baptism, Believer’s”, Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, ed. Walter A. Elwell, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 116.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, NICNT, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 762.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 767.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 764 including note 17.



WATER BAPTISM**Exercise**

1. What was the main lesson you learned from this reading?

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2. Why is the subject of water baptism important?

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3. What Scriptural arguments would you use to show that water baptism is not required for salvation?

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WATER BAPTISM**Exercise**

4. When and how should someone be baptized and why?

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5. Do you know someone who you should approach about being baptized?

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