

# Baptists and Baptism

An exploration of the topic of  
Believer's Baptism



# The Mode and Meaning of Baptism

- The practice of Christian baptism in the New Testament was carried out in *one* way: the person being baptized was *immersed* – put *completely* under the water and then brought back up again.
- Baptism by immersion is therefore *the* “mode” of baptism – the way in which baptism was carried out in the New Testament.
- The word translated “*baptism*” in almost all of our English Bibles is the Greek word *baptizō* which means “*to plunge, dip, or immerse*” something in water.
- This is the commonly recognized and *standard* meaning of the term in ancient Greek literature both inside and outside of the Bible.

# The Mode and Meaning of Baptism

- Unfortunately, instead of *translating* this Greek word *baptizō* (giving it's actual meaning in English) most English translations have chosen to *transliterate* the word (use a made-up English word that *sounds* phonetically like the Greek word), which then *obscures* its actual meaning.
- Here are some examples of what an *actual* translation would look like:
  - *And in those days John the Immerser comes, proclaiming in the wilderness of Judea* (Matthew 3:1 LSV)
  - *Are you ignorant that we, as many as were immersed into Christ Jesus, were immersed into His death?* (Romans 6:3 LSV)
- Had the NT writers intended to say “sprinkle” or “pour” water, rather than “dip” or “immerse” in water they had *other* Greek words they could have used as illustrated by the Septuagint translation of this passage:
  - *and the priest shall dip* (bapto – root word of baptizo) *his finger in the blood and sprinkle* (prosraino) *part of the blood seven times before the LORD in front of the veil of the sanctuary.*<sup>7</sup> *And the priest shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense before the LORD that is in the tent of meeting, and all the rest of the blood of the bull he shall pour out* (ekxeo) *at the base of the altar of burnt offering that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting.* (Lev 4:6-7)

# The Mode and Meaning of Baptism

- Furthermore, the *wording* of many New Testament passages where baptism is described *strongly implies* that baptism involved immersion.
- In Mark 1:5, people were baptized by John “*in the river Jordan*” (the Greek text has *en*, “in,” and not “beside” or “by” or “near” the river).
- Mark also tells us that when Jesus had been baptized “*he came up out of the water*” (Mark 1:10).
- The Greek text specifies that he came “*out of*” (*ek*) the water, not that he came away from it (this would be expressed by Gk. *apo*).
- The fact that John and Jesus went *into* the river and *came up out of it* strongly suggests immersion, since sprinkling or pouring of water could much more readily have been done standing beside the river, particularly because multitudes of people were coming for baptism.
- John’s gospel tells us that John the Baptist “*was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there*” (John 3:23).
- Again, it would not take a “*plentiful*” amount of water to baptize people by *sprinkling*, but water *would* need to be plentiful to baptize by *immersion*.

# The Mode and Meaning of Baptism

- When Philip had shared the gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch, “*as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?’*” (Acts 8:36).
- Apparently neither of them thought that ***sprinkling or pouring*** a handful of water from the container of drinking water that would have been carried in the chariot was enough to constitute baptism.
- Rather, they waited until there was a ***body of water*** near the road.
- The passage then goes on: “*he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing*” (Acts 8:38-39).
- As in the case of Jesus, this baptism occurred when Philip and the eunuch went ***down into*** a body of water, and after the baptism they came ***up out of*** that body of water.
- Once again ***baptism by immersion*** is the only satisfactory explanation of this narrative.

# The Mode and Meaning of Baptism

- The *symbolism* of union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection *also* seems to require baptism by immersion.
- Paul says, “*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life*” (Rom. 6:3-4).
- Similarly, Paul tells the Colossians that they have “*been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead*” (Col. 2:12).

# The Mode and Meaning of Baptism

- Union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection is clearly symbolized in ***baptism by immersion***.
- When the candidate for baptism goes ***down into*** the water, it is a picture of going ***down into*** the grave and being buried.
- ***Coming up out of*** the water is then a picture of being raised with Christ to walk in newness of life.
- Baptism thus very clearly pictures death to one's old way of life and rising to a new kind of life in Christ.
- But baptism by ***sprinkling or pouring*** simply misses this symbolism.

# The Mode and Meaning of Baptism

- In fact, the waters of baptism have an *even richer* symbolism than simply the symbolism of the grave.
- The waters also remind us of the waters of God's judgment that came upon unbelievers at the time of the flood (Gen. 7:6-24) or the drowning of the Egyptians in the exodus (Ex. 14:26-29).
- Similarly, when Jonah was thrown into the deep (Jonah 1:7-16), he was thrown down to the place of death because of God's judgment on his disobedience—even though he was miraculously rescued and thus became a sign of the resurrection.
- Therefore, those who go down into the waters of baptism really are going down into the waters of judgment and death, death that they deserve from God for their sins.
- When they come back up out of the waters of baptism it shows that they have come safely through God's judgment only because of the merits of Jesus Christ, with whom they are united in his death and resurrection.
- This is why Peter can say in 1 Peter 3:21 that baptism "*corresponds to*" the saving of Noah and his family from the waters of judgment in the flood.

# The Mode and Meaning of Baptism

- Sometimes it is objected that the *essential* thing symbolized in baptism is not death and resurrection with Christ but *purification* and *cleansing* from sins.
- Certainly, it is true that the waters of baptism *do* symbolize washing and purification from sins *as well as* death and resurrection with Christ.
- Titus 3:5 speaks of “*the washing of regeneration*,” and even though the word baptism is not used in this text, it is certainly true that there is a cleansing from sin that occurs at the time of conversion.
- Ananias told Saul, “*Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name*” (Acts 22:16).
- But to say that washing away of sins is the *only* thing (or even the most essential thing) pictured in baptism does not faithfully represent New Testament teaching.

# The Mode and Meaning of Baptism

- Washing and death and resurrection with Christ are *all* symbolized in baptism.
- Death and resurrection with Christ are symbolized *only* by immersion, *not at all* by sprinkling or pouring.
- In all the discussion over the mode of baptism and the disputes over its meaning, it is easy for Christians to lose sight of the significance and beauty of baptism and to disregard the tremendous *blessing* pictured by this ceremony.
- Passing through the waters of judgment safely, dying and rising with Christ, and having our sins washed away— these are *amazing* truths of momentous and eternal proportion and ought to be an occasion for giving great glory and praise to God!

# The Subjects of Baptism

- Many of the *narrative examples* of those who were baptized in the New Testament *strongly support* the idea that baptism was administered *only* to those who gave a believable profession of faith.
- For example, after Peter's sermon at Pentecost we read, ***“Those who received his word were baptized”*** (Acts 2:41).
- Similarly, when Philip preached the gospel in Samaria, we read, ***“When they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women”*** (Acts 8:12).

# The Subjects of Baptism

- The New Testament authors wrote as though they *clearly assumed* that *everyone* who was baptized had *also* personally trusted in Christ and experienced salvation.
- For example, Paul says, “*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ*” (Gal. 3:27).
- Paul here assumes that baptism is the outward sign that inward regeneration has already taken place.
- This would *not* have been true of *infants*— Paul could not have said, “*As many infants as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ*,” for infants have not yet come to saving faith or given *any* evidence of regeneration.

# The Subjects of Baptism

- And it's not just **only** those who repent and believe who are to be baptized – the scriptures teach that **all** those who repent of their sins and believe in Christ have a **duty** to be baptized.
- In giving the Great Commission, Jesus makes it clear that he expects **all** those who become his disciples to be baptized: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"  
(Mat 28:19-20)
- Peter, on the day of Pentecost **commanded** those present "*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*" (Act 2:38)
- Likewise, when Peter preached to the household Cornelius "*the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word,*" and therefore Peter "**commanded** them to *be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ*" (Acts 10: 47-48).

# Who Baptizes?

- Many think it should be the minister who baptizes.
- Sometimes this conclusion comes from a wrong clericalism, with a Roman Catholic-like assumption of the status given to someone who is ordained.
- Others think it simply does not matter who does the baptizing.
- Some have felt that it should be those who lead them to the Lord, others that it could be any pastor on staff.
- Some have felt that an elder should do it.
- Who should do the baptizing today?
- None of these answers given above are required by the biblical testimony.

# Who Baptizes?

- Neither by explicit instruction nor by example does the Bible teach that a particular administrator is essential for a true, valid baptism.
- Neither Jesus nor Paul baptized as a central part of their own ministry (see John 4: 2; 1 Cor 1: 14).
- Having said that, it is normally prudent to have someone perform the baptism who well represents the congregation as a whole.
- The senior pastor, the preaching minister, or some other elder recognized by the congregation would most obviously seem to act on behalf of the congregation as a whole and then ultimately on behalf of the Lord in their baptizing.

# The Age of Baptism

- Those who are convinced by the arguments for believer's baptism must then begin to ask, "How old should children be before they are baptized?"
- The most direct answer is that they should be old enough to give a believable profession of faith.
- It is impossible to set a precise age that will apply to every child, but when parents see convincing evidence of genuine spiritual life and some degree of understanding regarding the meaning of trusting in Christ, then baptism is appropriate.
- Of course, this will require careful administration by the church, as well as a good explanation by parents in their homes.
- The exact age for baptism will vary from child to child, and somewhat from church to church as well.

# The Roman Catholic View of Baptism

- The Roman Catholic Church practices infant baptism because it teaches that baptism is *necessary* for salvation and that the act itself brings *regeneration*.
- In this view, baptism functions as a channel through which the church grants saving grace, and therefore it should be given to all infants.
- If baptism is *required* to receive grace, then, according to the Roman Catholic view, salvation is *ultimately* the result of *good works*.
- The New Testament, however, teaches justification by faith *alone*:
  - “*By grace you have been saved through faith... not a result of works*” (Eph. 2:8-9)
  - Eternal life is “*the free gift of God... in Christ Jesus*” (Rom. 6:23)

# The Roman Catholic View of Baptism

- The Catholic claim that *baptism* is *required* for salvation would then be *similar* to the claim made by the *Judaizers* in Galatia who claimed that *circumcision* was necessary for salvation.
- Paul calls this “*a different gospel*” (Gal. 1:6), warns that reliance on works brings a *curse* (Gal. 3:10), and says that adding law-keeping to justification *separates* one from Christ (Gal. 5:4).
- The clear teaching of the New Testament is that *no work, including baptism, is the basis* of our salvation.
- Baptism therefore, is not the *cause* of our regeneration, but a physical act designed to *picture* the salvation and cleansing that has *already taken place*.

# The Paedobaptist View of Baptism

- In contrast both to the Baptist and Roman Catholic views, another commonly held view is that baptism is rightly administered to all *infant children of believing parents*.
- We refer to this view as the *paedobaptist* view.
- The prefix “paedo” is derived from the Greek word *pais*, meaning “child”.
- This view is held by *many* Protestant groups (especially Lutheran, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches).
- Paedobaptists tend to use one or both of the following arguments to biblically support their view:
  - The Argument From Circumcision
  - The Argument From Household Baptisms

# The Argument From Circumcision

- The argument from circumcision goes something like this:
  - In the **Old** Testament, circumcision functioned as the outward sign of entry into the covenant community and was given to all Israelite males at eight days old.
  - Since baptism is the **New** Testament sign of covenant membership, it **replaces** circumcision and should therefore be administered to infants.
  - The support for this idea is **supposedly** found in Colossians 2:11-12, where the Apostle Paul directly **links** circumcision and baptism, thereby **confirming** that baptism should be administered to infants in the New Testament:
  - *In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead*
  - In **reality**, there is not a **single** scripture that teaches that baptism is the New Testament **replacement** for circumcision in the Old Testament.
  - The paedobaptists **claim** that Colossians 2:11-12 links the two, but when we look at this passage **in context**, we can see that it does nothing of the kind.

Colossians 2:8 ***See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.*** <sup>9</sup> ***For in Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form,*** <sup>10</sup> ***and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority;*** (NASB)

- The original recipients of the Colossian letter were new Gentile converts who had been recently exposed to ***heretical teaching*** that ***questioned*** the ***sufficiency of Christ*** and ***encouraged*** a return to certain ***ceremonial practices of Judaism***.
- To ***counter*** this false teaching, the Apostle Paul here ***reminds*** the Colossians of the ***sufficiency of Christ*** and what he has accomplished on their behalf.
- Here he is warning them not to be taken in by “***philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men***” he reminds them that in Christ “***all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form***” and that “***in him***” they been “***made complete***”.

Colossians 2:11 *In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,<sup>12</sup> having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.*

- Here Paul tells the **how** they have been made complete in Christ.
- The false teachers were telling the Gentile converts in Colosse they needed to return to some of the Jewish ceremonial practices.
- Most of the Colossians, being Gentiles, had not been circumcised as infants on the eighth day by the “*hands*” (of men).
- In the Mosaic Law, it taught that this ceremonial practice of circumcision was a **picture** of a spiritual reality which **many** physically circumcised Jews had never experienced: circumcision of the heart (which is metaphorical way of describing regeneration):
  - *And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.* (Deut 30:6)

Colossians 2:11 *In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,* <sup>12</sup> having been buried with him in **baptism**, in which you were also raised with him **through faith** in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

- “*you were circumcised... by the circumcision of Christ*” – the circumcision that the **Colossians** had received was a **spiritual** circumcision “*made without hands*” (= circumcision of the heart) given by **Christ** at the time of their conversion.
- Furthermore, in their “*baptism*” (given **subsequent** to their conversion) they had publicly demonstrated that “*through faith*” they had been counted in Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection on their behalf.
- So, as you can see, Paul is not equating baptism to physical circumcision given to infants in the Old Testament here – he is not even talking about **physical** circumcision – he is talking about the circumcision of the **heart** (=regeneration) which must **precede** baptism.

# The Argument From Household Baptisms

- Advocates of the Protestant paedobaptist view are fond of citing the “many examples” of household baptisms described in the New Testament, households which they **assume** include infants, therefore demonstrating that **all** infants of believing parents should be baptized.
- But when we **examine** these passages **closely**, we find there is not a **single instance** of a “household baptism” mentioned in the New Testament where it can be shown that there were infants in the household.
- In several cases, these texts indicate that **all** who were baptized in the household had saving faith (and therefore were presumably not infants):
- For example, prior to baptizing the household of Cornelius, Peter asks “*Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?*” (Act 10:47)
- The Philippian jailer’s household was baptized (Acts 16:33), but Paul and Silas “*spoke the word of the Lord*” to **everyone** in the house (Acts 16:32), implying that everyone in the household could **understand** and **believe**.
- Afterward, the jailer “*rejoiced... with his entire household*” because he had believed (Acts 16:34), again indicating household faith.

# The Argument From Household Baptisms

- Similarly, Paul baptized “*the household of Stephanas*” (1 Cor. 1:16), yet he later states they were “*the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia*” who devoted themselves to serving believers (1 Cor. 16:15), again showing faith preceded baptism.
- Peter’s statement that “*the promise is for you and for your children*” continues by including “*and for all who are far off... whom the Lord our God calls to himself*” (Acts 2:39). The same context clarifies that “*those who received [Peter’s] word were baptized*” (Acts 2:41), not unbelieving children.
- Other passages mention entire households believing without mentioning baptism, such as the official whose “*whole household believed*” (John 4:53) and Crispus, who ***believed*** “*together with his entire household*” (Acts 18:8).
- The ***only*** household baptism where there is not an ***explicit*** mention of faith is Lydia’s (Acts 16:14-15).
- ***Lydia*** is said to have believed (the Lord “*opened her heart*”), but ***no information*** is given about her ***household*** and whether or not any of them were infants.

# The Paedobaptist View of Baptism

- A further objection to paedobaptism can be raised by asking what baptism accomplishes.
- Roman Catholics say it causes regeneration; Baptists say it symbolizes regeneration already received.
- Paedobaptists deny both, since infant baptism cannot symbolize **present** regeneration and **future** regeneration is uncertain, as some baptized infants never believe.
- Thus, paedobaptist baptism signifies only **probable** future regeneration.
- The New Testament authors do not say, “*Can anyone withhold water for baptizing those who will probably someday be saved?*” (cf. Acts 10:47), or “*As many of you as were baptized into Christ will probably someday put on Christ*” (cf. Gal. 3:27), or “*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus will probably someday be baptized into his death?*” (cf. Rom. 6:3).
- Instead, baptism signifies new birth, cleansing from sin, and entry into the Christian life, and should therefore be reserved for those who **show evidence** that these realities are already **true**.

# Where Did Belief in Infant Baptism Come From?

- The patristic literature of the first four centuries clearly shows how infant baptism developed.
- The first *known* reference to infant baptism occurs in the latter part of the *third century*, mostly in North Africa,
- The unifying of the church and state which began to develop in the *fourth century* provided the theological base for infant baptism to be accepted throughout the Christian church.
- After that, infant baptism began to develop into a generally accepted custom.

# Where Did Belief in Infant Baptism Come From?

- The Reformers' defense of infant baptism conflicted with their principles of *sola Scriptura* and, at times, *sola fide*.
- Zwingli, Luther, Bucer, and Calvin justified infant baptism through appeals to covenant theology, election, tradition, and speculative infant faith or regeneration, rather than a clear biblical mandate.
- The Reformers also relied heavily on historical continuity and church tradition, arguing that infant baptism had been practiced from early Christianity and was not explicitly forbidden in Scripture.
- Some, especially Bucer and at times Luther and Calvin, moved toward ***sacramental*** language, suggesting baptism brought about regeneration, forgiveness, or the “seed” of future faith – ideas which all ***conflict*** with the idea of justification by faith alone.

# How Important Is a Right Belief About Baptism?

- For some in our day, this doctrine seems rather trivial, much like the old song:

*You like potato and I like po-tah-to  
You like tomato and I like to-mah-to  
Potato, po-tah-to, tomato, to-mah-to  
Let's call the whole thing off*

- But this has not always been the case.
- In his book, *The Anabaptist Story*, William Estep tells how Ulrich Zwingli, the leading Swiss reformer, had students in his Bible study circles—who applied his own emphasis on *sola scriptura* (scripture alone as the ultimate authority for doctrine) to question and ultimately **reject** infant baptism in favor of credobaptism (believer's baptism, or baptism upon profession of personal faith).
- These individuals, primarily Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz who later, along with many others, came to be called “Anabaptists” (=“rebaptizers”), attempted to persuade Zwingli through public debates but **failed**.
- Zwingli not only **rejected** their views but publicly denounced them as divisive radicals and heretics, influencing the Zurich city council (with which he closely collaborated) to arrest, banish, and eventually **execute** some of them!

# How Important Is a Right Belief About Baptism?

- The willingness of the early Anabaptists to pay such a high price for their credobaptist beliefs may seem a bit extreme in our day.
- Would ***you*** be willing to be imprisoned and/or put to death for ***your*** credobaptist beliefs?
- Is it ***really*** that big of a deal?
- I would argue that obedience to Christ in the way we practice baptism is ***very*** important, and would like to think that were I faced with the consequences for my belief that the early Anabaptists faced, that I would be as faithful as they were.

# How Important Is a Right Belief About Baptism?

- The closing words of the Gospel of Matthew present some of the most important instructions of the Lord Christ to his redeemed people: *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”* (Mt 28:18-20).
- Despite the obvious significance of this Great Commission (as it's often called), followers of Christ have entertained both differing understandings and differing practices concerning Christ's command to baptize others.
- One would have hoped that Christ's church would uniformly understand and follow just what Christ instructed.

# How Important Is a Right Belief About Baptism?

- Yet the sad fact is that our different views of baptism mean that in all likelihood significant portions of Christ's church are failing to carry out what Christ has commanded, even if this failure stems from good motives.
- Christ's imperative here is that ***only*** those, and ***all*** of those, who have become believers in Christ should be baptized following their conversion to Christ and that their baptism should take place through their immersion in water.
- The ***subjects*** of baptism, then, are believers in Christ and his atoning work. The ***mode*** of their baptism is by immersion.
- Large portions of the church are living in disobedience to Christ, despite the fact that they would deny this is the case and they even attempt to ***defend*** their own practice of baptizing infants on biblical grounds.
- While we agree to disagree as brothers and sisters in Christ, our disagreement here must be seen by all followers of Christ as ***sobering***, since we cannot but conclude that obedience to our Lord is at stake in our understanding and practice of the baptism he commanded his followers to practice.