

# CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

Prepared by  
[Kirk Wellum, Pastor](#)  
Pilgrim Baptist Fellowship  
Ancaster, Ontario

## CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Christian Baptism in the New Testament](#)

[III. The Origin of Christian Baptism](#)

[IV. The Mode of Christian Baptism](#)

[V. The Proper Subjects of Baptism](#)

[Bibliography](#)

## I. INTRODUCTION

At key moments in the unfolding drama of redemption Jesus of Nazareth instituted two rites that he intended his church to observe until he comes again. The evening he was betrayed, he transformed the last part of the Jewish Passover into the Lord's Supper, which he gave to his disciples as a symbolic reminder of all that he had done and was about to do to secure their deliverance from sin and Satan. Then, after completing his cross-work and rising from the dead, before he ascended into heaven, he instructed his followers to go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. He gave them this post-resurrection baptism as a graphic symbolic declaration of faith and surrender, and as a sign of the many blessings that a believer enjoys because of his or her relationship to him.

Neither ordinance has magical saving power. Neither the bread nor the wine, nor the waters of baptism, convey grace in a mechanical manner. Both ordinances are symbolic representations of inward spiritual realities, which the believer has experienced by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But while they do not bring anyone into a state of grace, they are vitally important when it comes to our appreciation of all that has been done for us by our gracious redeemer, and neither of them can be ignored, distorted, or down-played without impairing our spiritual health.

In this paper I am going to survey what the Bible has to say about Christian baptism because unfortunately it continues to be the cause of much confusion and

division within the church. At the outset I acknowledge that sincere believers differ when it comes to baptism and have done so for hundreds of years. While we may agree to disagree, we still need to search the Scriptures to see what they have to say on this subject, asking the Holy Spirit to help us understand and submit to whatever they reveal. We need to be more like the Bereans, who were commended by the apostle Paul above the Thessalonians, because they received the message he proclaimed with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what he said was true (Ac.17:11). Although it is sometimes difficult to receive the teachings of Scripture when they run contrary to the ecclesiastical traditions we hold dear and the instruction of people we respect, we must come to grips with the Word of God if we are to be obedient to our Lord and walk in the fullness of his blessing.

It is my contention that the differences which exist within the Christian church on the subject of baptism are not benign. Many want to treat them as though they are nothing more than petty family squabbles that will never be resolved this side of glory. However, underlying a person's view of baptism is a definite concept of salvation, and though Christians on different sides of the baptism issue may agree on many things, unbiblical views of baptism misrepresent God's salvation at key points. Wrong doctrine inevitably produces serious errors in practice that not only harm individuals but distort the true nature of the Christian church.

## **II. CHRISTIAN BAPTISM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

In his article on "Baptism" in the Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Paul Jewett defines Christian baptism as an "initiatory washing with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit which the risen Lord commissioned his apostles to administer to all his followers as a mark of their discipleship." This helpful definition which is firmly based on the Great Commission (Mt.28:19-20) tells us that from the ascension of Jesus onwards, Christian baptism was an initiatory washing associated with conversion and the very beginnings of the Christian life. In fact, so strong is this link that Douglas Moo can say in his commentary on Romans that by the time Paul wrote that letter, the Greek word "baptizo," (which has come into our English Bibles as "baptism"), had almost become "a technical expression for the rite of Christian initiation by water." This means that by 57 A.D. (less than 30 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus), "baptizo" would immediately remind most people of the way Christians publicly professed their faith in Jesus and became members of his church.

Throughout the NT baptism is regarded as an outward sign that a believer has entered into the realities of the New Covenant, which Jesus sealed with his own blood on the cross. According to the apostle Paul, water baptism visually portrays the believer's union with Jesus Christ (Gal.3:26-27). The believer is "baptized into Christ" (NRSV), or "united with Christ in baptism" (NIV), which means more than simply being baptized "with reference to Christ," or "so as to become Christ's," which takes the phrase "in (eis) Christ" as another way of saying "baptized into the name of Christ." In Paul's mind there

is a spatial component. The believer is baptized into union with Christ so that he can be said to have clothed himself with Christ.

We find something similar in Rom.6:3-6, where Paul sees the initiation rite of water baptism (not Spirit baptism), as linking the believer to Jesus Christ, and in particular, to his death. This linkage or union, does not imply that our persons merge with Christ in some kind of mystical way. What is established is "a 'forensic' relationship, in which God views us in association with his Son and thereby applies to us the benefits won by his Son." It is also important to note that our submersion does not just symbolize Christ's death and burial and tie us to him because we have gone through a similar experience. It symbolizes the amazing redemptive fact that when he was buried, we were buried with him. In v.4, it is even described as the "means" (dia) by which we personally participate in Christ's death, burial and ultimately his resurrection. Because of this new relationship with Jesus Christ we have a new relationship to sin and a new inclination and strength to walk in obedience to God. These truly incredible realities are only possible because of what happened many years ago on Good Friday and Easter when Jesus died and rose again. Yet, as this passage makes clear, they are not personally applied to us until we believe and are baptized.

Paul makes the same basic point in Col.2:11-12, where once again he links water baptism to the burial of Christ. In v.11 he declares that a believer has been spiritually circumcised by God himself in a circumcision not done by the hands of men. This may be a figurative description of regeneration in which Christ supernaturally cuts away "our sinful natures" (NIV). Or, it may be a figurative way of saying that when Christ died, we died (cf. Rom.6:3-4). This second interpretation takes the phrase "the circumcision done by Christ" (NIV), or more literally "the circumcision of Christ" (NRSV and NASB), as a reference to Christ's death on the cross. His death, when he "put off the body of flesh," which is to say, he died violently, then becomes the great circumcision to which all OT circumcisions pointed (including his own infant Jewish circumcision on the eighth day, Lk.2:21). If this is the case, when Paul says, "in him you were circumcised," he means that God himself has "circumcised" all his people in Christ. He has dealt with the defilement of our natures in his Son and we are assured of this because "we have been buried with him in baptism" (v.12). The burial of Jesus confirms the reality and finality of his death while at the same time it sets the stage for his resurrection. Our being buried with him in baptism confirms our share in his death and marks our historical entrance into the implications of our "Christian circumcision." Our baptism signifies that we have died to our old way of life and have entered a new realm of existence. And as Christ's burial paved the way for his resurrection, so our participation in his burial implies that we also share in the resurrection power of God that raised Jesus from the dead.

The significance of baptism is further seen in Peter's preaching on the Day of Pentecost when he spoke of baptism in the context of repentance, the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ac.2:38). Later in Acts, Paul also connected baptism, repentance (calling on his name) and forgiveness (Ac.22:16). When he wrote to the church in Corinth, he reminded them that their baptism not only speaks of their immersion "in" (NRSV), not "by" (NIV), the Holy Spirit, but also of their incorporation

into the body or church of Christ (1 Co.12:13). (According to D.A.Carson "en + baptizo" in the NT indicates the *medium* of baptism - water, fire, cloud, and so forth - not the *agent* who does the baptizing).

In fact, so close is the relationship between baptism and New Covenant blessings that Peter in his first letter *seems* to go beyond mere symbolism when he speaks of "baptism that now saves you" (3:21). However, he immediately makes clear that he is not talking about the actual application of water to the body but of the "pledge of" (NIV), better translated, "appeal for" (NASB and NRSV), a good conscience towards God. In other words, we are not saved when we are baptized, or because we promise to live an obedient life. We are saved when we call upon the Lord for a "good or clear conscience." As Wayne Grudem puts it, we are saved when we ask God to "forgive our sins and give us a new heart." We are saved by grace because of the work of Jesus Christ who has gone into heaven and is reigning at God's right hand (1 Pe.3:21-22).

But having said this, it is important to recognize that in Peter's mind baptism and calling upon the Lord are so closely related that the former can function as a symbol of the latter. This allows him to speak about water symbolizing "baptism that now saves you" without slipping into some kind of mechanical salvation which attributes saving power to the physical act and therefore runs contrary to the well established biblical absolute of salvation by grace through faith alone.

At this point there is a critical biblical tension to be maintained. Douglas Moo sees this as "preserving the cruciality of faith while at the same time doing justice to the mediatorial role of baptism." He goes on to suggest that one way to do this is to remember the very helpful insight of James Dunn that "in the early church, faith, the gift of the Spirit, and water baptism were all components of one unified experience, which Dunn calls 'conversion-initiation.' Just as faith is always assumed to lead to baptism, so baptism always assumes faith for its validity." This is why Peter and Paul can use "mediatorial language" that sounds on the surface as though baptism has an efficacy that is independent of faith. Commenting on Ro.6:3-4, Moo once again hits the nail on the head when he tells us that, "water baptism functions as shorthand for the Christian's initial conversion experience as a whole." What is true of Romans 6 is also true of the rest of the NT, and interpreters would save themselves and their students a lot of trouble, if they remembered this simple rule.

Going a little further, G.R.Beasley-Murray tells us that "in Acts and the epistles baptism appears as a divine-human event, even as the 'turning' to God, with which it is invariably associated, is a divine-human event." This means that there is a profundity and yet a simplicity when it comes to baptism that should be appreciated and respected by all Christians. Jewett helps balance our perspective when he points out that in baptism both God and the person who has come to trust in his Son are speaking. God is assuring the believer that he is accepted and all his sins have been washed away because he has a vital share in what took place at Calvary. At the same time God is also encouraging the believer to live a new life by drawing upon the resurrection power of his Son which he can experience by faith because he has been wired into the very same power which raised

Jesus from the dead. This new life is a life of repentance, faith, love, obedience, humility, sacrifice, discipleship and fellowship with other believers who have been saved by grace, joined to the same Saviour, and adopted into the same family.

The value of this divine testimony will become increasingly apparent to the believer as time goes on. The Christian life has its mountains and valleys, its joys and sorrows, its ups and downs. When times are tough, we need to be able to look back and recall the early days when our experience of the Lord's love was brand new, when we felt the wonder of his grace, and rejoiced in the mercy which brought us under the shelter of his wings. Baptism reminds the believer of these things. It helps to anchor our minds and hearts when storm clouds appear on our horizon and we cannot see as clearly as we would like. It challenges our souls when the skies of life clear, the sun begins to shine and we are apt to do too much lounging around for our own spiritual good.

Not only does God speak in the waters of baptism, the believer speaks as well. It provides the new disciple with a public opportunity to tell the church and all who will listen, that he has turned from his sins to follow Jesus Christ. Born estranged from God he now confesses that sovereign grace has brought him to see that he was lost and in danger of destruction. He was without God and hope in this world until he saw Jesus, and then, everything changed. Now he has a brand new life. He has a Saviour and Liberator. He has a Prophet, Priest and King. He is no longer a rebel, but a willing captive of the Lord Jesus to whom he has gladly committed everything in this world and in the world to come.

Jesus said: "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven" (Mt.10:32). In the early church, one of the ways people acknowledged him was by being baptized in his name (Ac.2:38; 8:12; 8:35-38; 9:17-18; 10:47-48; 16:14-15; 16:31-34). It is a shame that in our day baptism has been overshadowed by other non-biblical ways (e.g. altar-calls) of acknowledging his lordship. No doubt biblical and theological confusion over what baptism is all about is partly to blame. Whatever substitutes men or institutions or para-church structures devise, nothing captures the essence of the gospel like baptism, as we find it in the pages of the NT. In the waters of baptism the believer's union with Jesus Christ, and through him, fellowship with all three members of the God-head is wonderfully displayed. In the waters of baptism the believer's repudiation of sin and allegiance to his Saviour and Lord is proclaimed for all to see and hear. It is also worth mentioning and considering that "we know of no Christian in the NT who had not been baptized, either by John or in the name of Jesus." What does this say about the sloppy thinking and "take it or leave it" attitude regarding baptism that so often characterizes much of evangelicalism today? Surely we are seriously out of step with our Lord!

### **III. THE ORIGIN OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM**

Where did the idea of Christian baptism come from in the first place? Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls some scholars have suggested a connection between

Christian baptism and the washings practised by the Qumran community and other sects that made their home along the Jordan River and in the region of the Dead Sea. But while the confession of sins was associated with their washings, it appears that they made more of the actual cleansing value of the water than we find in the NT, and they frequently repeated these baptisms to cleanse themselves of ritual impurities. When we first encounter baptism in the NT it is a one-time initiatory immersion that has significance beyond mere ceremonial purity.

Other scholars point in the direction of Jewish proselyte baptism which was required of Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism. After being circumcised, and prior to their first act of worship or sacrifice, they were immersed in water. However, there is no conclusive proof that proselyte baptism existed in the early first century and some scholars question whether it was ever practised before the rise of Christianity. Whatever the exact situation, in the gospels and in the early chapters of Acts, it is not Gentiles, but Jews who are being baptized upon the confession of their sins, even though they were already circumcised members of the covenant people of God.

The historical fact that baptism was practised by groups like the Qumran covenanters and possibly by the Jews at the beginning of the first century, in the region of Palestine, tells us that baptism existed prior to the NT as a ritual act with religious significance. D.A. Carson suggests that in this way baptism was just like circumcision in the OT. Abraham was not the first man to be circumcised because we know that it was widely practised in that part of the world before he came on the scene. What God did with circumcision in relation to Abraham was to invest it with covenantal significance. In other words, he took an existing practice and used it to teach spiritual truths to Abraham and his descendants. At the start of the NT we find God doing the same thing with baptism. He took an existing practice and invested it with new meaning and this is why baptism, as we find it in the NT, is different from other water rites that were part of the surrounding religious culture.

Absolutely critical to understanding God's adoption and transformation of baptism as a vehicle to declare certain spiritual truths, is someone named John, nicknamed the Baptist (the Baptizer), who we encounter in all four gospels and who was the forerunner of Jesus Christ. The gospel writers present him as the prophet who was specially prepared and called by God to set the stage for the coming of the long awaited Messiah. He did this by baptizing and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mk.1:1-4). In Mt.11:9-15, Jesus said that John was greater than all who had gone before him largely because he had been entrusted with the privilege and responsibility of pointing "most unambiguously to him." This is what he did both before, and especially after, he had the privilege of baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River (Jn.1:29-34).

The fact that Jesus submitted to John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, did not mean that Jesus was a sinner. When Jesus came to be baptized by John, the baptizer recognized his sinlessness and hesitated (Mt.3:13-14). Jesus urged him to proceed because he had come as the servant of the Lord to do his will which included identifying himself with the people he had come to save from their sins. This was exactly

what he did when he allowed John to baptize him. Luke tells us that he came with the people to be baptized (3:21). They were being immersed by John as an expression of their repentance and desire for forgiveness. They were also being baptized in preparation for the ministry of the greater One who was to come to prune and winnow his people (Mt.3:10,12; Lk.3:9,17) and to purify them with a baptism of the Spirit and fire (Mt.3:11; Lk.3:16). Jesus stood among them because they were typical of the people he had come to save. Their submission to John's baptism identified them as part of the remnant of Israel, the true people of God, the nation within the nation that was awaiting its redeemer. Those who refused his baptism declared that no matter what their physical connections to Abraham, they were not truly his sons or daughters.

After Jesus was baptized by John the Holy Spirit descended upon him (Mt.3:16; Mk.1:10; Lk.3:21-22) and he, like John, began to preach about the need for repentance in light of the nearness of the kingdom of God. At this time he began to gather a group of disciples, some of whom had already been baptized by John, and for a while, before John was thrown into prison, he and John were preaching and baptizing together (though according to Jn.4:2 it was not Jesus but his disciples who were baptizing), in the same region (Jn.3:22-23). Jesus' own baptism by John, the overlap in their ministries, the similarities in their message (Mt.3:2; 4:17; 10:7), and what appears to be echoes of John in Jesus' own words (Mt.7:16,19; 12:34; 13:30; 23:33; 8:10-12), all serve to tie the baptism of John to the early form of "Christian" baptism that Jesus' own disciples administered at the beginning of his earthly mission. After John was put in prison we have no record that Jesus' disciples continued baptizing. It was only after his resurrection that they resumed this activity which at that point was shaped by all that their master had done, by the ministry of the Spirit, and by the world-wide expansion of the church (Mt.28:19; Ac.2:38-39).

Further proof that Christian baptism emerged out of the ministry of John the Baptist is found in the fact that the disciples of Jesus did not have to be re-baptized on the Day of Pentecost (Ac.2), nor did Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria, though "he knew only the baptism of John" (Ac.18:25). What made Apollos different from the twelve disciples of John that Paul discovered in Ephesus, and whom he promptly re-baptized into the name of Jesus after he explained the gospel to them, was that they had not received the Holy Spirit (Ac.19:1-7). In fact, they did not even know that there was a Holy Spirit. This need not mean that they had never heard of the "Holy Spirit" since John had often spoken about the Spirit. It probably means that they did not know there was a Spirit to be given and received, or they had not heard about the resurrection of Jesus and his outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Whatever the exact situation that Paul encountered in Ephesus almost twenty years after John, these disciples had failed to understand the primary thrust of John's message, even though they were his disciples. Instead of looking beyond him to the One who was to come after him as Apollos had done, they were fixated on John. When Paul met them they were not Christians and therefore had not received the Spirit. They were in a kind of "salvation-history time warp." Once they grasped the central truth of the gospel, it was appropriate that they be baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. This was unnecessary for someone like Apollos, who had

followed the witness of John to Jesus, even though his understanding of Jesus was not altogether complete (thus Priscilla and Aquila in Act.18:26).

Because Christian baptism is rooted in the preparatory ministry of John the Baptist, his "repentance-baptism" that insisted on the personal renunciation of sin as a pre-condition, has far reaching implications for Christian baptism that must be taken seriously. It certainly had a direct bearing on how the disciples, who themselves had been baptized in this way, understood and practised Christian baptism after the resurrection. What they did during the early days of Jesus' ministry was provisional and eventually had to cease, not because their early form of "Christian baptism" was vastly different than John's, but because what they were doing anticipated the completed ministry of Jesus which would give their baptism its full and final significance. Until salvation was accomplished, the resurrection was an historical fact, and all authority was placed in his hands, they could not baptize repentant sinners into fellowship with the Triune God. The close connection between the baptism of John and Christian baptism means that we should expect to find the same stress upon personal repentance and faith in Christian baptism that we find in John. Attempts to circumvent this connection in order to find a justifiable reason to baptize those who lack personal faith and repentance, put John the Baptist and Jesus (and later the apostles) at odds with one another and disrupt the unique forerunner/Messiah relationship that exists between them in the NT.

If Christian baptism grew out of the baptism of John, where did he come up with the idea of a repentance-baptism? If his baptism was significantly different from the washings of the Qumran covenanters and the proselyte baptisms of the Jews, who influenced him? While in John's time and part of the world, baptism was a common feature of the religious landscape and these contemporary practices may have had some influence on him, we must keep in mind that John was not only the forerunner of Jesus Christ, he was the last of the OT prophets. Even a superficial reading of the OT will reveal that it is full of all sorts of ceremonial washings. For example, the priests had to wash before they ministered in the sanctuary (Lev.16:4; Nu.19:7), the people were required to wash if they defiled themselves by eating something unclean, or in some other way spelled out in the Mosaic Law (Lv.11-15). Furthermore, as the OT unfolds, we find the prophets calling on the people to "wash and make themselves clean" (Is.1:16), and to "wash the evil from their hearts and be saved" (Je.4:14). In Ezekiel, this insistence that they wash themselves becomes a prediction that in the last times God will intervene and do a mighty work of cleansing. "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols" (Ezk.36:25). Zechariah speaks of a day in which "a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity" (Ze.13:1). And Isaiah goes one step further when he prophesies about a time in the future when the Spirit will be given in conjunction with cleansing. "For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants" (Is.44:3 cf. Ezk.36:27).

When we take all these factors into consideration it is not hard to imagine how John, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, who filled him from birth (Lk.1:15), came

up with a unique baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Aware of all that was going on around him and thoroughly versed in the OT Scriptures, he developed his own cleansing in anticipation of the One who would really cleanse his people from their sins. While its meaning evolved with the unfolding of redemptive history, his baptism formed the basis and has exercised considerable influence on what we now know as "Christian baptism." Just as we must not drive an illegitimate theological wedge between John the Baptist and Jesus, we must not dilute the influence of the OT upon John by dragging in extra-biblical material relating to the religious practices of his day in an effort to modify his baptism where it challenges our traditional practices that do not square with what we find in the NT.

#### **IV. THE MODE OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM**

The Greek verb "baptizo," which unfortunately appears untranslated in our English Bibles as "baptize," normally means "to dip, or to immerse." Paul Jewett claims that lexicographers universally agree that this is the primary meaning of the word. Errol Hulse says that, "Greek writers, Pagan and Christian, ancient and modern unite in their testimony that this is the meaning of the word." In the NT, baptizo is used almost exclusively to refer to the immersion of people in water as practised by John the Baptist, or the unique immersion of Jesus by John the Baptist, or Christian immersion as practised by the early church. (The related noun "baptisma" is used exclusively to refer to either John's baptism or Christian baptism). On a couple of occasions in the synoptic gospels (Mk.10:38-39; Lk.12:50), baptizo is used metaphorically of the suffering and death that Jesus must endure on behalf of his people, and once in Mt.3:11, of the eschatological "Spirit-fire" baptism that Jesus was going to introduce as a result of his ministry. It is also used by way of analogy in 1 Corinthians 10:2, to describe the relationship of the Israelites to Moses. However, none of these variations alters the basic meaning of the word, instead they rely and draw upon concepts and imagery associated with immersion to make their point.

In Luke 11:38, baptizo is translated "washed" and describes the traditional, literal Jewish washing of hands in water (not under a tap) before a meal. In Mark 7:4, "baptismos," a substantival cognate (i.e. another noun related to baptizo), is used to refer to the washing in water (by immersion) of cups, pitchers and kettles, and in Hebrews 6:2 and 9:10, to various ceremonial washings that were mandated as part of the Old Covenant. But once again, none of these passages do anything to affect the primary meaning of the word which is to dip or immerse. Yet, in spite of this, down through the years some have tried to say that the use of "baptismos" in Hebrews proves that "immersion" is not always meant because in the OT sprinkling was sometimes a part of various rituals (Num.8:5-7). However, "baptismos" in Hebrews probably reflects Jewish, (and in the case of 6:2, maybe even pagan), as opposed to Christian usage, and as such covers a wide range of washings that are no longer valid because of the reality of the New Covenant. The generic usage of "baptismos" in the letter to the Hebrews in no way alters the meaning of baptizo and related words. It is strange logic which argues that because some things in the OT had to be sprinkled to be ritually clean, and the Greek

word "baptismos" may have been used by the Jews to describe these and many other washings, including those that clearly involved immersion (cf. Lv.11:28,40; 15:1f.; 16:4,28; Nu.19:1-22), that "baptizo" can mean "sprinkling or pouring" and therefore, sprinkling and pouring should be regarded as legitimate modes of Christian baptism! Someone who argues this way goes so far as to say: "The Greek term baptizo indicates a certain effect without prescribing the precise mode by which this effect is secured. Hence the ordinance is properly administered by sprinkling or affusion." Sadly, this theologically induced blindness just does not square with the facts. Desperate theologians notwithstanding, to be "baptized" as a Christian in the NT is to be immersed in water in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This undeniable linguistic fact is verified by the Didache 7, which dates back to the first half of the second century (100-160 A.D.), and is the oldest surviving baptismal manual we have. It assumes triple immersion (in the Triune name) and although pouring is allowed where there is not enough water, when the document talks about "pouring," it does not use the word "baptizo."

The *Greek* Orthodox Church, which knows the meaning of the Greek word "baptizo," immerses people, a fact that is all the more remarkable because the Greek Church practices infant baptism... not infant sprinkling or pouring... but infant immersion.

The Episcopal Church, after it broke with Rome in 1534, also baptized by immersion even though they also baptized infants. The first Episcopal Prayer Book adopted in 1549 said that the priest "shall take the child in his hands, and ask the name; and naming the child shall dip it in the water thrice. First dipping the right side; second, the left side; the third time dipping the face toward the font; so it be discreetly and warily done, saying, 'I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.' And if the child be weak, it shall suffice to pour water upon it, saying the aforesaid words." In 1662, the prayer book was changed to require that infants only be dipped once if they could endure it, otherwise pouring was allowed.

In Philip Schaff's, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol.7, he quotes Martin Luther as saying: "Baptism is that dipping into water, since it takes its name from the Greek, to baptize, signifying to dip, and baptism is a dipping. Baptism signifies two things - death and resurrection: that is, full and complete justification. When the minister dips the child into the water, this signifies death; when he draws him out again, this signifies life. Thus Paul explains the matter (Ro.6:4)... I could wish that the baptized should be totally immersed, according to the meaning of the word and the signification of the mystery; not that I think it necessary to do so, but that it would be well that so complete and perfect a thing as baptism should also be completely and perfectly expressed in the sign" (pp.218-219).

In his famous "Institutes," John Calvin admits that to baptize is to immerse even though he does not consider it essential. "But whether the person should be wholly immersed, and whether thrice or once, whether he should only be sprinkled with poured water - these details are of no importance, but ought to be optional to churches according

to the diversity of countries. Yet the word 'baptize' means to 'immerse,' and it is clear that the rite of immersion was observed in the ancient church" (chapter XV - par #19). And commenting on the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:38 he writes: "Here we see the rite used among the men of old time in baptism; for they put all the body into the water."

Others have objected to immersion because they feel it does not adequately represent the conceptual richness of union with Christ. While it provides a wonderful picture of the believer's union with him in his death, burial and resurrection, it poorly represents other aspects of the believer's union with Christ that are tied to baptism in the NT like being "crucified with him" (Rom.6:6), being "clothed with him" (Gal.3:27), being "incorporated into one body" (1 Co.12:13). Closely related to this argument is the objection that in the book of Acts the coming of the Spirit is sometimes described as a "baptism" (1:5) and other times as an "outpouring" (2:18,33; 10:45). Therefore, it is permissible when baptizing to do so by pouring.

There is more smoke than substance to both these objections. Does sprinkling or pouring really do a better job of capturing the wealth of theological truths that are tied to union with Christ? As an initiation rite, immersion symbolizes the most fundamental aspect of union with Christ (i.e. union with him in his death, burial and resurrection), without which none of the other aspects have any meaning. But even when it comes to being crucified with Christ, or clothed with him, or incorporated into his body, it seems to me that the totality of immersion beautifully communicates the overwhelming nature of these and other redemptive wonders. Ultimately, we must remember that it is the Holy Spirit who chose the language of immersion. If the Spirit had wanted to speak about "pouring" or "sprinkling" he, and biblical writers like Luke, who did his homework (cf. Lk.1:1-4), and Paul, who could be very precise when it came to words (cf. Gal.3:16), had the vocabulary to do so (*ekcheo/rantizo*) and would have done so.

The fact that the coming of the Holy Spirit is described both as a baptism and a outpouring has nothing to do with water baptism. The Spirit's coming is merely being described in different ways both of which emphasize that the era begun at Pentecost is a time of abundance. The risen Lord was going to immerse (baptize) his disciples in the Spirit as his forerunner had said (Mk.1:8), and as he had promised when he was eating with them after his resurrection (Act.1:5). In no way inconsistent with this perspective, but enriching and amplifying it, is Joel's statement about the Spirit being poured out (2:28-32). This is not a stingy, measured pouring that makes sure nobody gets too wet. John Stott tells us that the picture presented by the verb is "probably of a heavy tropical rainstorm, and seems to illustrate the generosity of God's gift of the Spirit (neither a drizzle nor even a shower but a downpour), its finality (for what has been 'poured out' cannot be gathered again) and its universality (widely distributed among the different groupings of mankind)."

When all is said and done, attempts to dismiss immersion as the proper mode of Christian baptism must be based on something other than exegetical or linguistic precision and reason. For objections to stand the primary meaning of baptizo must be

distorted and the NT manipulated rather than expounded. But make no mistake, the Greek is clear and so is the testimony of the church down through the years when it is candid and honest and not trying to protect ideas and practices that clash with the Scriptures.

## V. THE PROPER SUBJECTS OF BAPTISM

As important and fundamental as the proper mode of baptism is, the proper subjects of baptism are what Jewett calls "the hallmark of the baptist position." Baptists recognize that in the NT "faith is the threshold over which one steps into the Christian life, faith confessed in the act of baptism." This is not difficult to prove because the testimony of the NT Scriptures is unequivocal and abundant. In what is known as the Great Commission, Christians are commanded to go and make disciples of all the nations baptizing (immersing) them in the Triune name (Mt.28:19). A true disciple in the NT is always a believing follower of the Lord Jesus Christ and his baptism in the Triune name assumes some instruction and understanding of who the members of the Trinity are, and what they have done for him. When Jesus commanded his disciples to reproduce themselves, and then baptize these new converts in his name, he did not see this as a temporary state of affairs but as something that was to transpire, as he commanded, until the end of the age (Mt.20:20). This means that nobody has the right to amend his commission to suit their whims and fancies, or their fears and anxieties, no matter how well thought out, highly regarded, theologically sophisticated or apparently reassuring their alterations.

The early church understood what Jesus meant and put the Great Commission into practice. On the day of Pentecost, when those who were listening to Peter were cut to the heart and asked him and the other apostles what they should do, they were instructed to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. They were also informed that the promise of salvation was not just for them but for their children and all who are far off - for all whom the Lord effectually calls by his grace (Ac.2:38-39). This is another way of saying that if they, their children, or anybody else, repented of their sins and turned in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ their sins would be forgiven and they would receive the Spirit. This universal promise is still valid today.

The pattern established on Pentecost of Spirit-filled proclamation of the gospel, followed by believing acceptance, followed by baptism and the receiving of the Holy Spirit re-appears over and over again in Acts (8:34-39; 9:1-19; 16:13-15; 16:31-34; 18:7-8; 19:1-5). Even when there is a change in the sequence with regards to baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit, as in the case of the Samaritans (Ac.8:12-17), the same order of believing and then being baptized is preserved (8:12 cf.8:13). The same is true in the case of Cornelius and his household (Ac.10:1-48). The Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message while Peter was still speaking (10:44), before they were baptized (10:47-48). But this strategic variation in no way disturbed the basic pattern of gospel proclamation, faith and then baptism. Cornelius and his entire household had received the Spirit and

were speaking in tongues and praising God (i.e. they were all believers), before they were baptized.

Yet in spite of the evidence I have marshalled from the NT regarding believers as the only proper subjects of Christian baptism, there are many Christians who also want to include the infant children of believers. In fact, as Jewett says, "it is undoubtedly true that most Christians, if one takes into account all the centuries of Christian history, have been baptized in infancy, having been brought to the font by their parents or sponsors, rather than having come by their own consent and volition." How do we account for this? How can anyone baptize those who have never personally repented and trusted in Christ as the NT requires?

Over the years different answers have been given. Some have said that infants can be baptized based on the faith of those who have brought them forward. Others, like Luther, believed that it was on the basis of the infant's own unseen faith. Calvin justified it on the grounds that there is a seed of faith which is implanted in the children of believing parents because of the covenant promise of God. In this look at the subject of Christian baptism, I want to zero in on those who have adopted and developed Calvin's basic perspective. For instance, R.C.Sproul writing in a recent issue of "Tabletalk" (Nov.94), provides us with an example of the kind of position I am talking about. He writes:

*"While there is no explicit command to baptize infants, the practice is based on the essential unity and continuity of the covenant of grace administered to Abraham, which came to fruition in the new covenant. Nowhere in Scripture is the covenant of grace divided into two different covenants as the Baptists maintain. The covenant of grace is a single, spiritual covenant made initially with Abraham and fulfilled in Christ. Christ is always the head of the covenant, faith is always the instrumental condition, and the blessings are always the same - purification, forgiveness, eternal life. All three of these elements have been presented in both the Old and New Testaments.*

*Likewise the seal and sign represents these same promises and blessings given first to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ. By God's command, infants were received into the covenant community through circumcision, which signified all the promises and blessings of the covenant of grace. This sign has been continued into the New Testament in baptism as the promises and blessings are maintained. As circumcision represented the cutting away of sin, so baptism signifies the washing away of sin - both under the covenant of grace. While Scripture changes the mode of the sign from the Old to the New Testament, there is no evidence that it changes the subject. This is why the Scripture can speak of whole households being baptized - the Jewish people of that time would not have questioned the significance or meaning of this practice.*

*Circumcision did not mean the child was saved; likewise, not all who are baptized are saved. We must remember that the sign identifies with the grace signified. The grace may come before baptism (in the case of adults who profess Christ) or it may come after (in the case of baptized children who later profess). The efficacy of the sacrament resides totally in God's sovereignty and faithfulness" (p.41).*

Sproul has neatly summarized the Reformed evangelical position. 1) While there is no explicit command, infant baptism is based on the essential unity and continuity of the covenant of grace, 2) The covenant of grace is a single, spiritual covenant made initially with Abraham and fulfilled in Christ, 3) No sacramentalism, faith is necessary, 4) Because of covenantal unity, the sign of the new covenant can be given to the children of believers in the NT, just as Abraham gave the sign of the covenant God made with him to his infant sons in the OT, and 5) The sign of the new covenant is baptism which replaces the old covenant sign of circumcision. Those who hold this position believe that it accounts for things like "household baptisms," in which it is assumed that infants were baptized, "covenant children" instead of "privileged children" in 1 Co.7:14, and the "inclusion" of little children in the kingdom of God as opposed to the "likeness" of little children to kingdom citizens in Mk.10:14-16.

In response I would like to point out that there is good evidence that the whole question of infant baptism may be anachronistic. This means that trying to justify infant baptism by appealing to the Scriptures is like trying to justify a modern church bus ministry by going to the Bible and looking for evidence of bus ministries in the Old and New Testaments. There is no sense looking because it's just not there! It was unheard of at that time! If this is true, then the whole doctrine of infant baptism, and the elaborate covenantal structure on which it stands, is pure fiction and historical nonsense. This is a very serious charge, and even if the possibility exists that it is true, it needs to be weighed carefully by those who try to appeal to the Bible in an effort to support infant baptism.

G.R.Beasley-Murray in the Dictionary of NT Theology says that "the belief that the apostles commanded the baptism of infants is attested as early as Origen in the 3rd century A.D." R.T.Beckwith, writing in defence of the practice in the same volume, reports that the first explicit reference is found in Irenaeus (A.D.180). But whether it is the second or third century, doesn't really matter. There is still a significant time gap in which there is no explicit evidence for a practice that is supposedly part and parcel of the "covenant of grace" made with Abraham and fulfilled in Jesus Christ. While the Jews may not have found any reason to question the baptism of infants because their sons had always been circumcised, the historical silence on the subject is remarkable in light of the explosion of the gospel into the culturally diverse and theologically confused Gentile world.

Furthermore, in a book entitled, "Baptism in the Early Church," by H.F.Stander and J.P.Louw, that was reviewed in a 1994 issue of "Reformation Canada," by Michael Haykin, the authors (who come from a tradition that baptizes infants), make the claim that texts relating to baptism by early Christian authors are often quoted out of context.

The presence of infant baptism in various statements from second and third century authors are not always what they appear to be when the larger context is carefully examined. Then, after they examine a range of works from the first to the fourth centuries, they conclude that there is no indisputable, unequivocal evidence that infant baptism was practised until the third century A.D. They also reveal that Origen (185-254) and Cyprian (200-258) were among the first to clearly indicate that certain communities were beginning to tolerate the practice of infant baptism which nevertheless was not widespread during that century. However, during this same time believer's baptism was widely practised, and continued to be, until more and more people began to regard the act of baptism as having saving power, and then in a desire to make sure their children would go to heaven if they died, they began to baptize them as infants.

Michael Haykin is absolutely right when he concludes his review by stating that, "the ramifications of this book for the NT perspective on the proper subjects of baptism are immense... as Stander and Louw state [p.169]: 'it is unsound to scrutinize the NT writings for allusions to infant baptism, since the latter involved a historical development.'" If they are right, nothing more should be said in defence of infant baptism... it is plainly a corruption of NT Christianity that should be immediately rejected by all who love God's truth.

However, for the sake of argument, and because I suspect that these historical observations will not convince most people to renounce their traditions, I want to make some observations from the Bible. If something is wrong, or even worse, never existed in the early church, we ought to be able to demonstrate this from the Scriptures. When it comes to infant baptism, not only are the history books strangely silent until the third-century A.D., but the Bible is silent as well. L.Berkhof admits this in his Systematic Theology under the heading, "the Scriptural basis for infant baptism," when he writes: "It may be said at the outset that there is no explicit command in the Bible to baptize children, and that there is not a single instance in which we are plainly told that children were baptized. But this does not necessarily make infant baptism un-biblical" (p.632). If this doesn't make infant baptism unbiblical, it should certainly make us stop and take a long hard look before proceeding any further!

It is at this point that an appeal is made to "the essential unity and continuity of the covenant of grace administered to Abraham, which came to fruition in the new covenant"... to a "single, spiritual covenant made initially with Abraham and fulfilled in Christ." The hard question that must be asked however, is whether or not such a covenant exists in Scripture. It certainly exists in some theological books and in some very venerable church confessions, but does it exist in the Bible? The answer is "no." Nowhere does the Bible speak of a single, spiritual "covenant of grace" that somehow spans the ages and connects Abraham to Christ. It is a theological not a biblical term. This in itself does not make it wrong. Speaking about the intentions of those who coined the phrase W.E.Payne has observed: "presumably what was intended by the term 'covenant of grace' was to guard the truth of the unity of one way of salvation in all ages and the spiritual unity of the people of God in all ages." But while their intentions may have been good, as Payne goes on to note, "their concerns could have still been maintained by more biblical

terminology." As it stands this theological terminology is terribly confusing because the Bible does not speak of one covenant of grace with two different administrations, but of different *covenants* (plural). Gal.4:24-26 speaks of two covenants, one representing Mount Sinai, the other Jerusalem, the mother of all believers. Eph.2:12 speaks of a time when those who were Gentiles by birth were excluded from citizenship in Israel and were foreigners to the covenants of promise. And in Heb.8:7-13, the author says that if there had been nothing wrong with the first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. Then he goes on to speak about a new covenant that is clearly distinct from the first one that God made with Israel when he took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt.

Instead of a single, spiritual covenant of grace, what we have is "the eternal purpose of God which was accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph.3:11). Or, if you like, a single, spiritual, gracious "purpose" or "promise" (Eph.2:12) to save his people from their sins that was administered or accomplished by means of various historical covenants. This is an important distinction because it means that the Abrahamic covenant is but one of many biblical covenants through which God reveals and fulfils his plan of salvation. It is not the covenant of grace which came to fruition in the new covenant, but one of many covenants leading up to the new covenant in which the saving purposes and promises of God find their ultimate and most wonderful fulfilment.

Because the Abrahamic covenant, like every other biblical covenants leading up to the new covenant, is a means to the end, and not the end itself, we must be very careful not to bring over into the new covenant things that were intended to be types and shadows of the good things that were to come in Christ. Interestingly enough, circumcision is an excellent case in point. If we read the Abrahamic covenant carefully in its own context, and also in light of the new covenant, (which is how the covenantal structure of the Bible finally insists that it be read), we will not find any justification for baptizing the children of believers just because in the Abrahamic covenant Abraham was commanded to circumcise his natural sons and every male that was brought into his house (Gn.17:9-14). Circumcision had tremendous importance and value in the Abrahamic covenant, but it is a major mistake to work from infant circumcision to infant baptism, a mistake that would not be made if people began to see and make allowance for the diversity, as well as the unity, in the covenants as they advance toward Christ. Unfortunately, this failure blinds people to the real meaning and function of circumcision and baptism in the covenants in which they are found, and as a result both are confused and poorly understood.

The claim that because Abraham was instructed to give his infant sons the covenant sign of circumcision, that, therefore, believers who are the spiritual sons of Abraham should give their infant children the new covenant sign of baptism, fails to appreciate the role of circumcision in the Abrahamic covenant.

In his *Biblical Theology*, Geerhardus Vos has pointed out that there are two things that we must keep in mind when it comes to understanding the significance of circumcision. 1) It was instituted before the birth of Isaac and 2) in the accompanying

revelation only the second promise relating to numerous posterity is mentioned... meaning that circumcision had something to do with the process of human propagation. God was not trying to tell Abraham that the sex act was evil, but that what it produced was (i.e. fallen human nature). Furthermore, this was true even in the case of Abraham's own descendants, though he had earlier "believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Gn.15:6). In Romans, the apostle Paul tells us that Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised (4:11). Please note however, that his circumcision was a sign and seal of his righteousness, it was not a sign and seal of the righteousness that his descendants may or may not eventually possess by faith. It functioned differently in his life than it did in the lives of his natural descendants. While his circumcision spoke of his righteousness, their circumcision spoke of the fact that even though they were Abraham's children, they were unclean from the very beginning (which is why they were circumcised on the eighth day and not when they were admitted to full tribal rites as was the practice of the surrounding nations). And while their physical relationship to him entitled them to temporal, physical blessings under the Abrahamic covenant, it did not entitle them to any eternal, spiritual blessings unless they were spiritually like their father Abraham (i.e. they were looking in faith to God). This should not come as a great shock to those who know their Bibles because God has never promised spiritual blessings to anyone, at any time, on any other basis than grace. And grace by its very definition not only excludes all human merit, it also excludes physical and natural descent. This is true in both the Old and New Testaments no matter what the covenant, or the so-called "administration of the covenant."

Therefore, in a very real sense circumcision was an OT declaration of the gospel. It spoke of the need for radical surgery, for blood to be shed, because human nature from the very outset was polluted and defiled. In the OT, circumcision identified the natural, physical offspring of Abraham, but far more importantly, it told them that they had to be "born again" if they were going to have a part in the spiritual riches promised to their father Abraham through "the Seed" who would one day descend from him (Gal.3:16). This One, and he alone, is the only descendant of Abraham whose circumcision on the eighth day was not an indication of his sinfulness and his need of salvation, but a foreshadowing of what he would undergo on the cross when he stripped off the body of flesh (cf.Col.2:11) and died the just for the unjust to bring the true children of Abraham back into relationship with God.

To say that baptism has replaced circumcision is to misunderstand both. In the case of every natural descendant of Abraham except Jesus, circumcision spoke of what ***needed to be done*** if they were to experience God's salvation. This vital gospel message is behind the words of the prophets (Dt.10:16; 30:6; Jer.4:4; 6:10 mg.; 9:25-26), of John the Baptist (Mt.3:7-10), of Jesus (Jn.8:31-41), of Stephen (Ac.7:51) and of Paul (Rom.2:28-29), when they urge Abraham's natural children to circumcise their hearts and not to trust in their patriarchal connections. When they exhort them to bring forth evidence of their repentance as proof of a spiritual relationship to Abraham who was circumcised in heart (i.e. right with God) before a mark was ever placed on his body. This emphasis on what ***needed to be done*** can even be seen in the case of Jesus whose

infant circumcision pointed to what he *had to do* in order to fulfill the eternal purpose of God to save his people from their sins.

Baptism, on the other hand, proclaims *what has already been done*. It never says to the one being baptized that they must be born again if they are to share in all that baptism symbolizes. It proclaims the "true truth" that by faith they *have already* entered into a saving, life changing relationship with the living God. They *have been* joined in union with Christ. Their sins *have been* washed away and the promised Holy Spirit *has come* to live in their hearts. In fact, if we are biblically accurate, it is the Holy Spirit, not water baptism, who is the sign and seal of the new covenant. To the Ephesian believers Paul writes: "Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is the deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession - to the praise of his glory" (1:13-14 cf.4:30). Water baptism testifies to the fact that the believer *has already received* the sign and seal of the new covenant.

This is not to say that there is no Scriptural relationship between circumcision and water baptism. There is, if we go back to the place that circumcision had in the spiritual experience of Abraham. Christian baptism functions in the life of the believer as circumcision functioned in the life of the patriarch. Like Abraham's circumcision, water baptism proclaims what is gloriously true on the basis of personal faith in the gracious promises of God. But this is as far as the relationship goes. While Abraham was specifically authorized under the provisions of the Abrahamic covenant to apply the same sign (albeit with a different meaning and message) to his male descendants, we have no new covenant authorization to baptize anyone whose life does not show tangible evidence that they have turned from their sins and placed their confidence in King Jesus.

The Abrahamic covenant, like all covenants leading up to the new covenant, had a "duality" to it. Natural and spiritual promises, benefits, and beneficiaries were all bound together at that particular point in time. God was using Abraham to teach spiritual truths to his natural descendants and to the world. Because circumcision was part of this old order of things, it partakes of this duality. It served as a natural marker that also had various levels of spiritual significance depending on whether it was applied to Abraham, or to his physical offspring. The new covenant does not have a duality. The natural types and shadows of the Abrahamic covenant have been stripped away. It, and it alone, is a single, spiritual covenant that involves believers and no one else. It brings the eternal purpose of God to save his people from their sins, to its long awaited climax.

Like the new covenant of which it is a part, baptism does not function on various levels. This means that it does not mean one thing when applied to believers and something related but quite different, when applied to their children. Baptism is for those who by grace have gone through the narrow gate and are walking on the narrow road that leads to life. The children of believers are in a very privileged position. They are the subjects of their parents' prayers, they are exposed to the Word of God and to the testimonies of their parents and other Christians, and they are urged to seek the Lord while he may be found and call upon him while he is near. But nowhere in the NT are we

told to baptize them until they give evidence that they are supernaturally born children of promise, or if you like, children of Abraham.

Just because they are our children as believers does not mean they have been chosen by God, nor that they have any share in the new covenant. To baptize them as if they did, or in the hope that they will, is completely inappropriate and unjustifiable. To baptize them as a sign that they are "covenant children" who need to respond to the gracious overtures of God, is to go back to the types and shadows of the OT, to the days of Abraham and Moses when God was preparing Israel and the world for the emergence of a new nation and people who would all know him, love him, and serve him. Those days are gone forever and with them rites like circumcision that preach about what should and will be true of God's people as a result of the Messiah's work. Today, the risen Lord is building a spiritual house that is composed of living stones that he intends to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices (1 Pe.2:5). The baptism of believers celebrates the Messiah's gracious work and it identifies the people who have been personally and individually revolutionized by it.

The differences between baptism and circumcision explain why both of them could exist together in the early church, as long as neither became a condition of salvation. If the paedobaptist (those who practice infant baptism) were right, this co-existence would have been impossible. If baptism is the sign mandated by the new covenant in place of circumcision, Paul would never have compromised the gospel and circumcised Timothy (Ac.16:1-3) but would have insisted that his new covenant baptism made his old covenant circumcision unnecessary. But he did not, because he knew that even though circumcision and baptism are related to one another in terms of the message they convey, in important covenantal ways they are as different as apples and oranges.

Finally, some have admitted that believer's baptism looks like the only way to go if you look at it from the perspective of faith. But if you put the emphasis on God's sovereign grace and his covenant promises (albeit often misunderstood covenant promises), then infant baptism looks much more plausible. This sounds pious, but it is really a subtle form of hyper-Calvinism. God is sovereign in grace but we only know that grace as we personally turn in faith to Jesus Christ, and according to the NT, baptism is about that turning in faith to God. It is not about God's sovereign grace and covenant promises yet to be realized in the life of God's elect (if indeed the infant being baptized proves to be elect), but about sovereign grace that has already been experienced, and covenant promises that have already come to fruition, in the life of the elect believer who is being baptized.

In conclusion, I believe that the anachronistic nature of infant baptism, the deafening silence of the Scriptures, the complete absence of a single, spiritual covenant of grace, and a proper understanding of circumcision and baptism all militate against the baptism of infants as practised by many evangelical churches today. On the other hand, the clear teaching of the NT, the testimony and example of the early church, the promise of grace administered by means of different biblical covenants culminating in the new covenant, and a proper understanding of circumcision and baptism all support my

contention that the believer's immersion in water is the only initiatory washing that we are commanded by the Lord Jesus to carry out in his church, until he comes.

Is this merely a tempest in a teapot, or perhaps more appropriately, in a baptismal font or tank? No, it is a matter of doing things the way the head of the church commanded. And it is also a real concern because it affects evangelism and an accurate understanding of the gospel. When unbiblical ideas and practises, like those associated with infant baptism, gain ascendancy in the church, one of the first things to go is a biblical evangelism that starts at home and insists on repentance, faith and holiness of life, for all who call themselves Christians. Next, we will find distorted views when it comes to the true nature of the church, and then, those haunting and sometimes paralyzing problems of assurance that arise because of confusion with regard to the very beginnings of the Christian life. The life of faith is never easy and has enough problems of its own without making it more complicated by straying from the path clearly marked out in the Scriptures.

If the infant children of believers are not the proper subjects of baptism, why has this practice existed for so long and why is it so entrenched in certain branches of the Christian church to this day? Two reasons come to mind: 1) The deep seated tendency of the human heart to trust in types and symbols as opposed to the Lord Jesus Christ who is the Sum and Substance of the gospel. 2) The deep need for security when it comes to the spiritual welfare and destiny of our children. The irony is that when we get our eyes off of Jesus and go beyond his word, instead of truth we are left with fiction, and instead of security we are left with anxiety. In the Bible there are wonderful blessings attached to obedience. Where believer's baptism is practiced as an "initiatory washing with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," as our risen Lord commanded, there is a joy, peace, power, and a felt presence of the Spirit that cannot be denied. All the mysteries of life and death have not been disclosed to us and we will always have some questions that will go unanswered. But when all is said and done, I submit that it is always better to walk in obedience to the Word that has been revealed, than to concoct doctrines and practice rituals that obscure the grace of God so wonderfully made known in our Lord Jesus Christ to all who believe.

Reflecting on his baptism C.H.Spurgeon writes:

*"I can never forget 3rd May, 1850; it was my mother's birthday, and I myself within a few weeks of being sixteen years of age. I was up early to have a couple of hours for quiet prayer and dedication to God. Then I had some eight miles to walk, to reach the spot where I was to be immersed into the Triune name according to the sacred command.*

*The wind blew down the river with a cutting blast, as my turn came to wade into the flood, but after I had walked a few steps, and noted the people on the ferry-boat, and in boats, and on either shore, I felt as if Heaven, and earth, and hell, might all gaze upon me, for I was not ashamed, there and then, to own myself a follower of the Lamb. My*

*timidity was washed away; it floated down the river into the sea, and must have been devoured by the fishes, for I have never felt anything of the kind again. Baptism loosed my tongue, and from that day it has never been quiet. I lost a thousand fears in the River Lark, and found that 'in keeping His commandments there is great reward'."*

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Bauer, W. A Greek-English Lexicon Of The NT And Other Early Christian Literature. Tr. and ed. from 4th German ed. Arndt, W.F. and Gingrich, F.W. Chicago: University Press, 1960.

Beasley-Murray, G.R. "Baptism". Dictionary of NT Theology, Vol.1, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1975, 143-154.

Beckwith, R.T. "Infant Baptism". Dictionary of NT Theology, Vol.1, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1975, 154-160.

Calvin, John. Commentary on Acts 1-13. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, reprinted 1979.

\_\_\_\_\_. Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol.2. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960.

Carson, Alexander. Baptism... Its Mode and Subjects. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1981. Originally published 1853.

Carson, D.A. Matthew. The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol.8, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984.

\_\_\_\_\_. Showing the Spirit. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1987.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Gospel According to John. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991.

Carson, Herbert. "The Mode of Baptism." Local Church Practice. Sussex: Carey Publications, 1978, 40-41.

Dunn, J.D.G. Baptism. The New Bible Dictionary 2nd Edition. Wheaton Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers Inc., 1982, 121-124.

France, R.T. Matthew. New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1994.

Grudem, Wayne. First Peter. TNTC. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988.

Haykin, Michael A.G. Book Review of Baptism in the Early Church, by H.F.Stander & J.P.Louw. Reformation Canada, Vol.17, Issue 1, 1994.

Hulse, Errol. The Testimony of Baptism. Sussex: Carey Publications, 1982.

\_\_\_\_\_. Baptism and Church Membership. Sussex: Carey Publications, 1979.

Jewett, Paul. "Baptism (Baptist View)." The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol.1, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977, 466-468.

Kingdon, David. Children of Abraham. Sussex: Carey Publications, 1975.

Ladd, George E. A Theology of the NT. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974.

Longenecker, R.N. Acts. The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol.9, Grand Rapids, MI: 1984.

Moo, Douglas. Romans 1-8. The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary. Chicago: Moody Press, 1991.

\_\_\_\_\_. Romans. New Bible Commentary, 21st Century Edition. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1994.

Motyer, J.A. "Baptism." The New Bible Dictionary, 2nd Edition. Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers Inc., 1982, 121-124.

Murray, John. "Baptism (Reformed View)." The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol, 1, Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1977, 468-469.

O'Brien, Peter T. Colossians, Philemon. Word Biblical Commentary. Great Britain: Robert Hartnoll Ltd., 1985.

\_\_\_\_\_. Colossians. New Bible Commentary, 21st Century Edition. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1994.

Pardee, William H. Baptism. Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Payne, W.E. The Abrahamic Covenant. Typed notes supplied by the author with indebtedness gratefully acknowledged to the work of Pastor Greg Nichols.

Reisinger, John G. Abraham's Seed. Discussion Paper delivered at the Fellowship for Reformation and Pastoral Studies in Toronto on January 9, 1984.

Rice, John R. Bible Baptism. Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1943.

Sproul, R.C. "The Sacrament of Baptism and Infant Baptism." Tabletalk, November 1994. Lake Mary FL: Ligonier Ministries, 1994, 40-41.

Stott, John R.W. The Spirit, The Church, and The World (The Message of Acts). Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1990.

Vos, Geerhardus. Biblical Theology. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975.