

BELIEVER'S BAPTISM BY IMMERSION: A NEW TESTAMENT AND BAPTIST DISTINCTIVE

Our church is patterned after the New Testament in faith and practice. We stand in the scriptural and historical truth of our spiritual forefathers. We practice the ordinance of baptism after the New Testament pattern with respect to subjects—believers, and mode—immersion. This paper is presented as an explanation of our belief and practice.

BAPTISM AN ORDINANCE—NOT A SACRAMENT

The term “ordinance” (from the Latin *ordinare*, to put in order) denotes something ordered, decreed, or commanded. In the “Great Commission,” the Lord declared, “...teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you...” (Matt. 28:20). Every command of the Lord to His church is an “ordinance” in principle. The primary and central Gospel ordinance is preaching. Historically and theologically, Baptists have distinguished between the “ordinances” of baptism and the Lord’s Supper and the Romish or Protestant “sacraments,” i.e., those rites that are meant to be a means of grace in some mystical sense.¹ *Historically and theologically, therefore, the term “ordinance” distinguishes baptism and the Lord’s Supper as being only symbolic and representative in nature and considers them to be means of grace only insofar as they bring the mind and heart to fix themselves upon the spiritual reality thus symbolized.* The term presupposes no mystical significance whatsoever.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM

Baptism is not a “seal of the covenant” as circumcision was in the Old Testament (Gen. 17). **Even the circumcision of Abraham was “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:11), i.e., the faith of Abraham preceded his circumcision.** Circumcision was a sign of the Old Covenant made with Israel with respect to the land of Canaan; baptism is a gospel ordinance peculiar to the New Testament church and economy. It is the symbolic picture or representation of the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ (See Rom. 6:1–6). When a person submits to scriptural baptism in obedience to the Lord and his Word, he identifies himself publicly in the symbolism of the gospel. **Baptism is at once an act of obedience, identification and submission.** It is an act of obedience to God and His Word (See Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:41). As such, it is “the answer of a good conscience toward God” (1 Pet. 3:20–21). It is an act of identification in the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:3–5). As

¹ An ordinance is a direction or command of an authoritative nature (Lat. *ordo*, to put in order, decree, establish). A sacrament is a means of grace through a given element, e.g., baptism or communion (Gk. μυστήριον, mystery; Lat. *sacramentum*, secret, *sacer*, holy). Observance of baptism and the Lord's Supper are commands of our Lord (Matt. 28:20), not physical elements through which grace is secretly or mysteriously communicated. The Protestant "sacramental mentality" was inherited from the Romish notion of baptismal regeneration and the Mass. Romish *transubstantiation* is to a given extent revived in Lutheran *consubstantiation* and present to a given degree in the Reformed idea of the sacrament, which posits something mysterious and beyond the physical elements.

such, it focuses upon His saving work and efficacious blood and so is a symbolic cleansing from sin (See Acts 22:16). It is an act of submission to the “Name” of the Lord Jesus, i.e., a public acknowledgment of His Lordship over the life (Acts 2:38).

THE REASONING FOR INFANT SPRINKLING

The argument for infant sprinkling is taken from the traditional Reformed view of “covenant theology,”² not from the Scriptures, which are not only silent on the subject, but clearly and unmistakably teach the baptism of believers only, and that by immersion.³ Infant sprinkling and believer’s baptism *do not agree on any given point and cannot be parallel to any extent.* It is not merely a question of the mode and subjects of “baptism,” *it is also a question of purpose and significance that reaches to the very essence of salvation by grace alone.* The “baptism” or “rhantism” (ῥαντισμὸν, to sprinkle) of infants is a “sacrament” that to a given extent mysteriously confers or communicates grace. These “covenant children” are thus in some way “united to Christ,” have their names written in the Lamb’s book of life,⁴ and enter within the “pale” of the church. They are considered as presumptively regenerated until the contrary appears in their lives. *Should they die in such a state, they are certain of heaven.* What is this, but the shadow of Rome obscuring the light of the Truth from the traditional Protestant mentality? The clear and unmistakable teaching of the New Testament is the immersion of believers in the name of the Triune God. *Neither subjects nor mode of baptism can be changed without altogether changing both its meaning and its significance.*⁵

² The origin of the argument that infant baptism was the counterpart and fulfillment of infant male circumcision was first introduced by Huldreich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger in their disputations with the Anabaptists as they sought to defend infant sprinkling and the concept of covenant children against the clear Scriptural teaching of believer’s baptism by immersion by “arguing from the covenant.” See M. E. Osterhaven, “Covenant Theology,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 279.

³ Infant sprinkling is neither a “good” nor a “necessary consequence” deduced from Scripture. It is rather a traditional idea imported into Scripture from Romish tradition and a process of arguing “from the covenant” in the context of an “Old Testament mentality.” Cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 632: “*The Scriptural basis for infant baptism.* 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...” He then proceeds to “argue from the covenant” and seeks to relate baptism to circumcision.

⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, III, p. 588: “...those parents sin grievously against the souls of their children who neglect to consecrate them to God in the ordinance of baptism. Do let the little ones have their names written in the Lamb’s book of life, even if they afterwards choose to erase them. Being thus enrolled may be the means of their salvation.”

⁵ In a paper entitled “The Covenant Context for Evangelism,” Dr. Norman Shepherd, Chairman of the department of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, writes:

“The covenant affords the perspective from which the evangelistic task of the church ought to be approached...1. The Great Commission arises out of and is patterned after the Covenant made with Abraham...2. Reformed evangelistic methodology must be consciously oriented to the covenant of grace rather than to the doctrine of election...3. *Baptism rather than regeneration is the point of transition from lostness in death to*

CIRCUMCISION, BAPTISM AND REGENERATION

The Old Covenant—sign of circumcision has been replaced, not by “baptism” of any type, but by a sovereign act of God, a spiritual “circumcision of the heart,” i.e., regeneration (See Dt. 10:16; 30:6; Ezk. 36:25–27; Jn. 3:3–5; Rom. 2:28–29; Col. 2:11–13. See also Jer. 31:31–34; 2 Cor. 3:3–18; Heb. 8:1–13). As *circumcision* was the covenant–sign of the Old covenant for physical or national Israel, so “spiritual circumcision,” or *regeneration* is the covenant–sign of the New or Gospel Covenant for believers, or “Spiritual Israel.” Baptism is distinctly a New Testament ordinance. Its mode is immersion and its subjects are those who manifest a credible profession of faith, after the pattern of the New Testament.⁶ Circumcision in the flesh has found its realization, or fulfillment and anti–type, in the circumcision of the heart, i.e., regeneration under the New Covenant.

ABRAHAM: HIS SEED AND HIS SPIRITUAL CHILDREN

The traditional Reformed argument from Rom. 4:9–12, that, as circumcision was a “sign or seal of the covenant,” so is infant sprinkling, actually disregards both the statement of Rom. 4:9–12 and the context of Gen. 17, which describes the institution of circumcision as a token or sign of the covenant. In Rom. 4:9–12, the subject is Abraham, who was circumcised *as a believer*. Circumcision was to *him, and to him alone*, “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he [already] had yet being uncircumcised.” In Gen. 17 Abraham was commanded to circumcise *every male*—sons, servants, slaves, relatives—in his household as a “token” of the covenant. This circumcision–covenant had to do with the possession of the land of Canaan, and *not* with the eternal promises of salvation (cf. v. 7–10). Further, Abraham circumcised Ishmael (v. 25–27), *whom he already knew was not included in the covenant of promise* (v. 15–21). Lot, Abraham’s nephew, was *not* circumcised, although he *was* in the covenant of grace as a “righteous” man.⁷ The covenant of promise (Gen. 12:1–3), as enlarged in Rom. 4:13–25; 9:1–11:32; and Gal. 3:1–29, was made to Abraham’s *spiritual children* (τέκνα Αβραάμ, i.e., believers. Jn. 8:39; Rom. 4:11–17; 9:6–24); the covenant of circumcision, having to do with the land of Canaan, was made to Abraham’s *physical seed* (σπέρμα Αβραάμ, Jn. 8:33, 37).

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAITH AND BAPTISM

What is the scriptural relationship and order that is to exist between faith and baptism? By the third century A.D., the teaching that baptism as a rite is efficacious for regeneration and the forgiveness of sins (i.e., baptismal regeneration) became largely accepted in the degenerate and apostate churches. Closely and logically following this came the practice of infant baptism. *This radical departure from the New Testament was a graphic example of confusing the symbol with the reality of truth.* As a result of this

salvation in life.” (As quoted in *The Banner of Truth Magazine*, Issue 166–167, p. 60, Italics added).

⁶ If there is any reality at all to baptism being a “seal,” “sign” or “token” of the covenant, then scripturally and logically under the New or Gospel Covenant, it must be the baptism *of believers only, as they alone are included within the New or Gospel Covenant.*

⁷ 2 Peter 2:7–8 “And delivered just (δικαίον) Lot...For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed *his* righteous soul...”

principle, many religious groups in history have considered baptism either to be synonymous with the act of salvation or at least inherently related to it. In the former category are Romanists, Greek Orthodox, and certain Protestants (e.g., High Anglican, some Lutherans, and Episcopalians); in the latter are such groups as the “Church of Christ” Church (“Campbellites”) and United Pentecostals or “Apostolic” Churches. The former groups take their principle from such proof-texts as Jn. 3:5 and the latter from such as Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38 and Acts 22:16.

The New Testament uniformly teaches that faith is to precede baptism, that baptism is a conscious, voluntary act of obedience, identification and submission on the part of the believer. John the Baptist baptized only repentant adults (Matt, 3:1–12). The apostles baptized only those who evidenced a profession of faith according to the Commission of the Lord (Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 2:41–42).

THE SCRIPTURAL MODE: IMMERSION

THE MEANING OF THE WORD “BAPTISM”

There is one root term used in the New Testament for baptism: βαφ, which denotes *depth*. From this derived the common Greek noun βάθος, “deep, depth,” and the verb βαθύνω, “to make deep.”⁸ This root has entered the English language in terms that derive from “bath,” e.g., “bathyscaph” and “bathysphere,” vehicles for deep-sea exploration. From this root derive two words: βαπτίζεῖν, a verb which denotes “to dip,” “plunge,” “immerse,” or “wash by dipping.” The noun form is βαπτίσμα, or “baptism.”⁹ Had the inspired writers of the New Testament desired to convey the idea of sprinkling, they would have used the common term in the New Testament for sprinkling, ῥαντίζεῖν.

Those who seek to change the mode to sprinkling or pouring state that the central idea is not immersion, but rather being “washed” from sin (Acts 22:16; Titus 3:5), but this must consistently either *literally* teach baptismal regeneration or *figuratively or symbolically* teach believer’s baptism. Some have sought to use Isa. 52:15 and Dan. 4:33 to buttress their arguments for sprinkling. Isa. 52:15 is in the context of the suffering of our Lord, the whole passage extending through chapter 53. It is argued that the Ethiopian Eunuch must have read this part of chapter 52 and naturally came to the conclusion after Philip’s preaching, that he was to be sprinkled (Acts 8:27–39). The basic Hebrew term is פָּרַץ, “to startle, spurt, sprinkle.” The basic term in the LXX is θαυμάζω, “to startle, astonish, marvel at.” in the context of the horrible physical suffering and mutilation of our Lord and the immediate context of v. 14, the term must be “startle or astonish many nations.” The use of ἐβάφη in the LXX in Dan. 4:33 must be taken as a hyperbole, “baptized,” i.e., “drenched with the dew

⁸ These terms are used both literally and figuratively: Cf. Rom. 8:39 where the terms “height, nor depth” (βάθος) refer to the celestial and infernal realms. The term is also used for deep water (Lk. 5:4), depth of earth (Matt. 13:5; Lk. 6:48), deep poverty (2 Cor. 8:2), the inner workings of satanic intrigue (Rev. 2:24), and “deep” spiritual truths (Rom. 11:33; 1 Cor. 2:10; Eph. 3:18).

⁹ βαπτίζεῖν also carries a figurative significance of “identification” or being “overwhelmed” (E.g., Matt. 20:22–23; Mk. 10:38–39; Lk. 12:50; 1 Cor. 10:2; 12:13). To the meaning being “dip,” “plunge,” “immerse,” all standard lexicons and critical Greek works agree. The very term “baptize,” a *transliteration*, entered into the English language and Bible because the paedobaptists did not want to translate it as they would have had to, to be true to the text and language—as “immerse” or “dip”.

of heaven.”¹⁰ Some have taken the references to the “baptism” of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5; 2:1–4) as scriptural proof for pouring as a proper mode. Here, the connotation of “baptism” must be one of identification—the Holy Spirit identifying the church as His ordained institution for the Gospel economy.¹¹

THE WITNESS OF HISTORY

An examination of religious history reveals that *immersion was the common mode of baptism for over 1300 years and was the common mode in Britain until at least the year 1600. This is proven beyond question by ancient church baptisteries, Romish and Protestant documents and the well-documented practices of the Church of Rome, the British Church and the practices of the Reformers.* Mark the following quotes from writers, either Romish or Protestant, concerning immersion:

Mabillon, the great Roman Catholic historian, gives an account of the practice in the late Middle Ages, describing an immersion which was performed by the pope himself, which occurred in the church of St. John the Evangelist. It is said that the pope blessed the water and

then, while all were adjusting themselves in their proper places, his Holiness retired into an adjoining room of St. John the Evangelist. attended by some acolothysts who took off his habits and put on him a pair of waxed trousers and surplice and then returned to the baptistery. There the children were waiting—the number usually baptized by the pope. After the pope had asked the usual questions he immersed three and came up out of the baptistery, the attendants threw a mantle over his surplice, and he returned.¹²

Luther, in his early days as a Reformer, wrote:

The term baptism is Greek, and may be rendered dipping, as when we dip something in water, so that it is covered all over. And although the custom is now abolished amongst many, for they do not dip children, but only pour on a little water, yet they ought to be wholly immersed and immediately withdrawn. For this the etymology of the term seems to demand. And the Germans also call baptism *taufe*, from depth. which in their language they call *tiefe*, because it is fit that those who are baptized should be deeply immersed. And certainly, if you look at what baptism signifies, you will see that the same is required. For it signifies this, that the old man and our sinful nature, which consists of flesh and blood, are totally immersed by divine grace, which we will point out more fully. The mode of baptizing, therefore, necessarily corresponded with the significance of baptism, that it might set forth a certain and full sign of it.¹³

The great Genevan Reformer, John Calvin wrote in his *Institutes*:

¹⁰ The Heb. reads צָבַע from צָבַע to *dip*, necessarily a hyperbole. Such language does not buttress the idea of sprinkling, unless the very meaning of the terms becomes meaningless.

¹¹ This is in keeping with visible manifestation of the glory of God upon the tabernacle and Temple. Cf. Ex. 40 and 1 Kgs. 8:1–11. If the matter be pressed, then we will admit to pouring as a mode—but to be biblical, the subjects must be seated, and the entire room filled with water—an immersion (Acts 2:2).

¹² Mabillon, *Annales Ordinis sancti Benedicti*, I. 43, as quoted by John T. Christian, *History of the Baptists*, I. p. 82.

¹³ Martin Luther, *Krip. Tyrol. Anab.*, p. 17, as quoted by Thomas Armitage, *History of the Baptists*, p. 398.

Whether the person baptized is to be wholly immersed, and that once or thrice, or whether he is only to be sprinkled with water, is not of the least consequence: churches should be at liberty to adopt either, according to the diversity of climates, *although it is evident that the term baptize means to immerse, and that this was the form used by the primitive church.*¹⁴

Archbishop Whately, Anglican:

Except upon extraordinary occasions, baptism was seldom, or, perhaps, never, administered for the first four centuries, but by immersion or dipping. Nor is aspersion or sprinkling ordinarily used to this day... England was the last place where it was received, though it has never obtained so far as to be enjoined; dipping having been always prescribed by the rubric.¹⁵

Dean Stanley, preeminent Anglican prelate and scholar:

For the first thirteen centuries, the almost universal practice of baptism was that of which we read in the New Testament, and which is the very meaning of the word—“baptize”—*those who were baptized were plunged, submerged, immersed into the water.* That practice is still, as we have seen, continued in Eastern Churches. In the Western Church it still lingers amongst Roman Catholics, in the solitary instance of the Cathedral of Milan ...It lasted long into the Middle Ages... *Even in the Church of England it is still observed in theory. Elizabeth and Edward the Sixth were both immersed. The rubric in the Public Baptism for Infants, enjoins that, unless for special cases, they are to be dipped, not sprinkled.* But in practice it gave way since the beginning of the seventeenth century.¹⁶

Thus, it is witnessed by history—even by Romish and Protestant historians—that the teaching of the New Testament is believer’s baptism by immersion, any other mode being unscriptural and a product of expediency, tradition or prejudice.

THE SCRIPTURAL SUBJECTS: BELIEVERS

The New Testament plainly teaches believers’ baptism. The proper subjects for baptism are:

- “Disciples” (Matt. 28:19).¹⁷ The major force of the language falls on “make disciples” and the word “them” (αὐτούς, masc. pl.) has “disciples,” (μαθητεύσατε, lit: “make disciples,” and “disciples” as a noun would be masc. pl.) not “nations,” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, neut. pl.) for its antecedent. The “Great Commission” clearly states that only “disciples,” i.e., converts, those evidencing the marks of grace, are fit subjects for baptism (μαθεύσατε...βαπτίζοντες αὐτούς...).
- Those who “bring forth fruits meet for repentance” (Matt. 3:7–8).
- “He that believeth” (Mk. 16:16).

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chap. xv., section 19.

¹⁵ Quoted by Richard B. Cook, *The Story of the Baptists*, p. 31.

¹⁶ In *Nineteenth Century*, October, 1879, as quoted by Richard B. Cook, *Ibid.*, pp. 30–31.

¹⁷ Matthew 28:19–20 πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτούς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος, διδάσκοντες αὐτούς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν· καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ μεθ’ ὑμῶν εἰμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος. .

- The repentant and believing (Acts 2:38).
- “They that gladly received the Word” (Acts 2:41).
- A person who possesses heart–belief (Acts 8:36–37).
- One who was a “brother,” singled out by God as a convert, and who evidenced a genuine conversion experience (Acts 9:1–18).
- Those whose hearts the Lord has opened (Acts 16:14–15).
- Those who have heard the Word of God and believed (Acts 16:30–34).

It is a primary and axiomatic principle of interpretation that no clear teaching of Scripture can be set aside from vague reference or silence, yet that has been the process of paedobaptists who argue from the vague reference of “household baptisms,” and from the silence of the New Testament to introduce an Old Testament mentality and practice.¹⁸ There is not any scriptural, historical, or logical place where baptism has replaced circumcision. *The anti–type of circumcision is regeneration, or the true “circumcision of the heart”* (Cf. Dt. 10:16; 30:6; Ezk. 36:25–27; Jn. 3:3, 5; Rom. 2:28–29; Col. 2:11–13). Further, the question that arose about the legitimacy or “sanctification” of children with at least one believing parent would have been entirely unnecessary if the rite of circumcision had been replaced by baptism. Certainly the Apostle could have clarified the matter for those still in ignorance concerning the position of “covenant children.” (See 1 Cor. 7:12–14.)

The inherent weakness of the above position has been presupposed by the paedobaptists themselves in their greatest argument, the continuity of the covenant. They assume or presuppose that the “covenant of grace” (not the eternal covenant of redemption and grace inferred in the Divine decree and the process of election, predestination and covenant–redemption; but a “covenant” of Old Testament proportions suited to the Hebrew race and nation) is the same in both Testaments; i.e., the Old Testament *Groepsverbandgodsdienssten*¹⁹ extends into the New Testament church. Yet even this is allegedly an argument from silence.

The New Testament is silent about infant baptism, as are the Apostolic Fathers (i.e., those early Christian writers who lived in the generation after the Apostles, viz., Clement of Rome, Barnabas, Ignatius, Hermas, Papias, and Polycarp). In the following generation, Justin Martyr does admit to baptismal regeneration, but not to infant baptism. The first clear testimony is from Tertullian, who wrote in opposition to it (185 A.D.). **The first clear testimony in favor of infant baptism is from the pen of Cyprian at the Council of Carthage (253 A.D.). It did not become a general practice until the fifth and sixth centuries when it was mandated by Imperial edict under Emperors Justin and**

¹⁸ The so–called “family baptisms” in the New Testament do not teach that infants are to be baptized. The only details given in the inspired record reveal that *the family members were converted before baptism*, i.e., they believed before they were baptized. (See Acts 16:30–34).

¹⁹ Lit: a monolithic group of people bound together by race and religion. Term from Dr. Leonard Verduin.

Justinian (538 A.D.).²⁰ A few quotes from prominent paedobaptist writers should settle the issue. The great church historian, Augustus Neander, a Protestant paedobaptist, wrote:

It cannot possibly be proved that infant baptism was practiced in the apostolic age. Its late introduction, the opposition it met with still, in the second century, rather speak against an apostolic origin.

There does not appear to be any reason for deriving infant baptism from an apostolical institution, and the recognition of it which followed somewhat later, as an apostolic tradition, serves to confirm this hypothesis.²¹

Phillip Schaff, although a defender of infant baptism, admits that it is contrary to the spirit of the gospel, and as a rite was not common until the time of Constantine:

...the New Testament contains no express command to baptize infants; such a command would not agree with the free spirit of the gospel. Nor was there any compulsory or general infant baptism before the union of church and state...²²

Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, Dean of Westminster, and prelate of the Church of England, wrote:

In the Apostolic age, and in the three centuries which followed, it is evident that, as a general rule, those who came to baptism, came in full age, of their own deliberate choice. We find a few cases of the baptism of children; in the third century, we find one case of the baptism of infants. Even among Christian households the instances of Chrysostom, Gregory Nazianzen, Basil, Ephrem of Edessa, Augustine, Ambrose, are decisive proofs that it was not only not obligatory, but not usual. They had Christian parents and yet they were not baptized till they reached maturity.²³

THE PROPER AUTHORITY FOR BAPTISM

The “Great Commission” was given to the church as an institution, not to the apostles as individuals or indiscriminately to anyone or any organization outside the New Testament church. (See Matt. 28:18–20). Part of this commission is to baptize. Thus, the authority for baptism rests with the New Testament church. The command of the Lord Jesus Christ and the example of the apostolic churches places baptism in an intrinsic connection with this institution alone. (See Acts 2:38–42).

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²⁰ Augustine (354–430) became its champion, but even he admitted that its authority rested on ecclesiastical custom and not Scripture.

²¹ Augustus Neander, *General History of the Christian Religion and Church*, I., p. 430; See also Richard B. Cook, *The Story of the Baptists*, p. 26.

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