

# **The Proper Subject of Baptism**

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## The Proper Subject of Baptism

### Introduction

In a recent correspondence, a Presbyterian acquaintance of mine questioned why Baptists could not better demonstrate the spirit of the Lord's prayer in John 17:11 (NASB). "Holy Father, keep them in Thy name, *the name* which Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, even as We are." This acquaintance asked if it did not bother me that Augustine, Calvin, Luther, and other historically influential theologians could not join a Baptist church. Furthermore, he stated, "Should we not treat the doctrine of the sacraments like we do so many other doctrines where we recognize legitimate diversity?" This sentiment represents the view of many non-Baptists, and the questions of some Baptists. How essential is proper baptism? If baptism is not crucial, then Baptists should unify with those of opposing views to present a united witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world.

He asks excellent questions which deserve response. Baptism is only as important as Scripture makes it. Thus, presupposing an inerrant view of the Scripture and a desire to follow completely Christ's commands, this presentation will investigate the subject of baptism according to Scripture. This presentation will examine two separate areas which necessarily correlate to the current discussion. First, we must understand what Scripture indicates is the duty of the believer concerning proper doctrine. Second, we must examine the importance of baptism. If baptism is not important in Scripture, then we must not overemphasize it. Third, we will attempt to determine if Scripture presents a proper subject of baptism or if ambiguity demands leniency in this doctrine. In conclusion, comments will be made concerning the meaning of believer's baptism in relation to infant baptism.

### The Importance of Doctrine

The current generation has tended to emphasize pragmatism and relativism rather than absolute truth and the importance of doctrine. Thus, a brief look at a few verses which indicate the importance of doctrine may be helpful to emphasize the need to treat this issue seriously. The scriptural view of baptism will be demonstrated in particular in the next section.

Matthew 5:19 states, "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." This passage follows the beatitudes. Perhaps the command only relates to the non-ecclesial conduct of Christian men; however, if baptism is the first step of obedience, the public profession of the believer and the identification with the church of Jesus Christ, does it not also fall into the category of a commandment?

If Scripture clearly articulates Christian baptism as part of the tradition given from Christ and His disciples, then all Christians must consider 2 Thessalonians 3:6, which says, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that

you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.” This paper contends that baptism is part of that tradition. First, the Lord gives the commission in Matthew 28:19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.” Does this statement not summarize the tradition handed down? Peter’s sermon recorded in Acts states, “repent and be baptized for the remission of sin.” Obviously Peter considered baptism part of the tradition. Philip when teaching the Ethiopian eunuch does so in such a way that the eunuch’s response is, “What prevents me from being baptized?” Philip considered baptism part of the tradition which needed communicating when explaining the Gospel.

The doctrine of baptism has created controversy since the days of Novatian and Donatus in the third and fourth centuries after Christ. The controversy has yet to cease and continues to divide denominations. So just how important is baptism?

### **The Importance of Baptism**

First, baptism is not necessary for salvation. Baptism guarantees salvation no more than does saying a prayer or walking an isle. Salvation comes by grace through faith expressing repentance and belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. To establish this position one need only look at the thief on the cross. Jesus told the thief that he would be with Him that day in paradise. The thief never had a chance to receive proper baptism, and yet Jesus indicates his salvation. Additionally, Paul, when confronting division in the church, claims in 1 Corinthians 1:17, “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.” If baptism were essential for salvation, then surely Paul would not have made such a statement. Paul would have stated the opposite, claiming that he was sent to preach and baptize. Baptism does not insure salvation nor does it procure it.

Baptism also does not guarantee a sinless life. Some have held that sin after baptism evidenced an un-regenerate spirit or that sin after baptism could not be forgiven. You will recall that many, including Emperor Constantine, waited until their death bed for baptism because of a probable misunderstanding concerning the meaning of the ordinance.<sup>1</sup> Scripture nowhere indicates that sin after baptism cannot be forgiven nor that baptism exalts one’s chances of living a sinless life. It will be shown that according to Scripture baptism is the first step of obedience, the public profession of faith, and the public identification with the church of Jesus Christ.

Understanding that baptism does not secure salvation or obtain the ability to live the perfect life, the doctrine must not be under-emphasized. The importance of baptism

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<sup>1</sup>Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), 127 states, “He [Constantine] was not baptized until he lay dying in 337, but this implies no doubt about his Christian belief. It was common at this time (and continued so until about A.D. 400) to postpone baptism to the end of one’s life, especially if one’s duty as an official included torture and execution of criminals.” See also D. G. Kousoulas, *The Life and Times of Constantine the Great* (Danbury, CT: Rutledge, 1997), 460 who says in his discussion of Constantine’s baptism near his death, “Many believed that with the baptism all their sins were washed away, so they waited until the last moment when they were fairly sure that they were not going to sin any more.”

begins with John the Baptist who prepared the way for the ministry of Jesus. What symbol did God lead John to use in his preparation? Baptism. John came preaching a message of repentance and baptizing people who repented of their sins. Preparation for the coming kingdom came through preaching and baptism.

Jesus also indicated that baptism was important. Why did Jesus submit himself to baptism? Mark 1:9-11 states, “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him; and a voice came out of the heavens: ‘You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased.’” From this passage, three important lessons can be learned. First, Jesus traveled a great distance to undergo the baptism of John. Jesus traveled in those days from Nazareth in Galilee to the Jordan River. The Bible does not give the specific location on the Jordan River of John’s baptism, but most believe that John’s baptism was farther rather than closer to Nazareth because John was near the wilderness. This journey would have been between thirty and sixty miles one way. Remember that in Jesus’ time this journey would occur on foot, and it appears that he made the trip alone. This means that the Son of God who knew no sin deemed it important enough to travel several days journey to be baptized by John. Should not baptism be as important to us as it was to our Savior?

Second, Jesus came up out of the water immediately. This indicates that Jesus had no sin to confess—unlike the others that John baptized who repented of their sins. Not knowing any sin, Jesus bypassed the usual repentance which took place. With no need for repentance, Jesus’ actions make baptism important. Third, the reader will note that in this and other passages that after the baptism of Jesus, the Father responded by voicing his pleasure and visibly sending the Spirit to verify Christ’s ministry. Although the Father does not explicitly say whether the action of baptism itself or the obedience of the Son pleased Him, one must admit that there are no coincidences with God and either way Jesus’ baptism pleased the Father. The fact that baptism marked the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus, and that God voiced His pleasure immediately following this act and not before it indicates the importance of baptism. If baptism were this important for Jesus, who knew no sin, then how much more important is baptism for those of us who are sinners.

Last, Jesus demonstrates the importance of baptism in the commission given to his disciples. “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...” In His last words prior to his ascension, He gave His vision statement for the church. This statement literally rendered contains one verb with three participles. As you go, make disciples, baptizing and teaching them. Some argue that the participles may be placed in any order; however, taking seriously verbal plenary inspiration means that even the order of the given participles is inspired. This being the case, Jesus clearly states to 1) go and preach the Word, 2) make disciples, 3) baptize them, and 4) teach them all things that he has commanded. Surely teaching all things is important enough; however, baptism receives prior mention which places additional emphasis on its importance. By this logic, proclaiming the Gospel is of first importance, making disciples is of second importance, baptism is of third importance, and everything else that Christ taught comes fourth. The emphasis of baptism comes because it serves as the public profession of the inward decision to serve, follow and identify oneself with

Christ.

The book of Acts demonstrates the importance of baptism. The early accounts in Acts of presenting the Gospel include a discussion of baptism. Acts 2:38 records the first sermon after the resurrection of Christ: "Peter said to them, 'Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" Acts 8:12 records Philip's preaching: "But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike." Acts 8:35-36 records Philip's teaching to the Ethiopian Eunuch: "Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?'" Philip's presentation of the Gospel included baptism.

Not only did Paul emphasize baptism, but he required rebaptism in certain cases. Acts 19:3-5 states, "And he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' And they said, 'Into John's baptism.' Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.' When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus."

Additional evidence could be given to demonstrate the importance of baptism; however, this author believes the importance of baptism has been properly demonstrated through this summary collection. Now that the importance of following the doctrine Jesus gave us has been established, and since the importance of baptism has been established, what remains is to determine what the Scripture says concerning baptism. If it can be clearly demonstrated that the Scripture puts forth believers as the proper subject of baptism, then the traditions of men should be immediately abandoned and the practice of Scripture followed.

### **The Scriptural Position on the Proper Subject of Baptism**

This author contends that Scripture presents a consistent formula of 1) preaching, 2) response or belief, and 3) baptism. This section contains a discussion of several Scripture passages which support this formula. This author has researched every verse in the New Testament and will address those which most strongly support this position. There are no verses which contradict this position; however, some consideration will be given to the household baptisms in Acts because Pedobaptists most often appeal to these passages for support of their practice. The defense of the presented formula will begin with John the Baptist, move to Jesus, and follow the practice throughout the remainder of the New Testament focusing specifically on Acts.

John the Baptist followed the pattern of preaching a message of repentance first, baptizing with a baptism of repentance second, and pointing to the coming Messiah third. Matthew 3:2 states that John preached a message saying, "Repent for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Verse 6 indicates that some of the hearers were responding by being baptized in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. Obviously, no infant could hear, respond, and confess sins. Thus, only men and women having the ability to reason were baptized. A similar pattern is present in Mark 1:4-8. John preaches a message of repentance, the people respond and are baptized and confess their sins. Luke 3:1-16 provides further insight as the crowds questioned John concerning what they should do. An infant has no ability to understand and formulate questions. Thus, one must conclude

that those receptive to John's message about the coming kingdom were the subjects of baptism. These subjects responded after hearing and responding to the message of John.

Jesus' clearest statement on baptism comes in the form of the commission given to Christians, just before His ascension, in Matthew 28:19-20. Jesus says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I command you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." The clear command is to go and make disciples. After making disciples, baptism and teaching occurs. By following the formula given by our Lord, none but believers will be baptized. Because infants do not have the rational capacity to believe, to profess, to accept, or to commit their lives to anything, they cannot be disciples worthy of baptism.

In Mark 16:16, Jesus says, "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned." Many scholars question the textual validity of Mark chapter 16. However, whether these verses were inspired by the Holy Spirit and part of the inerrant Word or whether scribes added them later, the understanding of baptism remains consistent with other passages in Scripture. This verse so closely associates baptism with salvation as to leave no question that it was considered the public profession of the inward decision. In order for baptism to be that public profession, the subject of baptism must believe. Without belief, the subject has nothing to profess and there is no meaning to the baptism.

John 4:2 states that Jesus "was making and baptizing more disciples than John." In order for a person to become a disciple, they must possess intellectual capacity to reason and follow. Although Jesus did not perform the baptisms himself, this passage again clearly indicates that believers are the proper subject of baptism. In addition, all three of the previous passages support the formula that preaching came first. Second, the hearers responded either positively or negatively to the message. Third, those responding positively wishing to become disciples would then receive baptism.

Acts chapter 2 records the sermon of Peter. Peter's sermon begins in verse 14 and continues through verse 36. After preaching, the crowd responds in verse 37 by asking what they should do. The crowd has heard, processed the message delivered, and responded with questioning. Peter answers in verse 38, "Repent and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." Only a person of reasonable age could recognize and repent of his or her sins. This command was not issued to one person as being responsible for the household but to each individual "...each of you..." as a personal response before God. Verse 41 states that, "those who had received his word were baptized." If only those who received the word were baptized, then only believers were baptized. In addition, the close association of salvation and baptism indicates that baptism served as the public profession of the inward decision. Thus, Peter repeats the New Testament pattern of 1) preaching, 2) belief, and 3) baptism.

Acts also records the actions of Philip. First, Philip preached in Samaria. Acts 8:12 reads, "But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike." This verse indicates that Philip preached, the people responded and then were baptized. The language could not be clearer. In this same chapter, Philip also interacts with the Ethiopian eunuch. Verse 35 states that "Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him." After Philip had preached the Gospel, the eunuch

later responds, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” Philip preached and the eunuch, after accepting his statements, requested baptism. Verse 37, which the most reliable original manuscripts do not include, indicates something of importance. Although this verse was likely added in the early church, the addition did not create a controversy. As a result, the verse has remained in translations to modern times in brackets.<sup>2</sup> The likely reason adding this verse did not raise any questions was that believing was considered the necessary prerequisite for baptism. Verse 37 states that Philip responded, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” Even without verse 37, the language clearly indicates that the eunuch believed Philip’s message. Otherwise, the eunuch would not have responded in obedience to what Philip directed him to do.

Acts also records Paul’s actions with regard to baptism. Although his position can easily be established from the household baptisms, this paragraph will discuss Acts chapter 19, as the household baptisms will be treated in a different section. In Acts 19:2-5, Paul confronts some disciples about their baptism. He discovers that these disciples have only been baptized into John’s baptism. Paul explained about Jesus’ baptism, and the disciples received baptism into the name of the Lord Jesus. What is interesting to note in this passage is that Paul required re-baptism, and the disciples did not object to re-baptism. The disciples’ additional learning led to a willing response of re-baptism. Why did Paul ask for them to be re-baptized? Their first baptism was not right because the meaning of their baptism was improper—a baptism of repentance and not confession. From this one can deduce that those who have not been baptized, as a profession of faith in Jesus Christ in obedience to His command, should now be properly baptized. The meaning of any other baptism is compromised. Paul here demonstrates the pattern of explanation, acceptance, and proper baptism.

One last verse should also help establish the position and understanding of Paul. Romans 6:2-4 states, “How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” Paul clearly indicates that baptism symbolized the identification with Christ through baptism. Believers are symbolically buried with Christ and raised to walk in newness of life. Certainly no one would claim that a non-believer or an infant would emerge from the waters of baptism to walk in newness of life. No logical conclusion exists except that believers experience baptism to, among other things, identify themselves with Christ. What more should be written? The Scripture clearly demonstrates that preaching leads to belief which leads to baptism. The proper subjects of baptism are believers.

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<sup>2</sup>Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001), 315 states that this verse did not exist in the earliest manuscripts. “Its insertion into the text seems to have been due to the feeling that Philip would not have baptized the Ethiopian without securing a confession of faith, which needed to be expressed in the narrative. Although the earliest known New Testament manuscript that contains the words dates from the sixth century (ms. E), the tradition of the Ethiopian’s confession of faith in Christ was current as early as the latter part of the second century, for Irenaeus quotes part of it (*Against Heresies*, III.Xii.8).”

### **Household Baptisms**

Some may respond that, “Yes, the Scripture clearly establishes believers as one subject of baptism, but also implies that infants were baptized in New Testament times.” The most common passages used to attempt this proof come from the household baptisms in the book of Acts and in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. The argument states that because the Scripture says all of the household was baptized then surely infants must have been present in those households, and because of that, infant baptism is acceptable. Two main problems exist with this argument. First, Baptists do not concede that infants were present in the households. In fact, the Scripture indicates that no infants were present. Second, two of the three household baptisms in Acts and 1 Corinthians mention faith in conjunction with the baptism. If infants cannot believe, then no infants were present

Acts 16:31-34 tells the story of the jailer who believed and his entire household was baptized. In verse 31, Paul and Silas told the household to believe in the Lord Jesus, and they would be saved. After the preaching, the household believed and experienced baptism. How do I know they believed? Because verse 34 states that the jailer “rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.” The entire household believed in God and then the entire household was baptized. What a joyous occasion that must have been! No infant experienced baptism on that day, because infants are not able to believe.

Acts 18:8 states that “Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians, when they heard, were believing and being baptized.” No further explanation is needed for this passage. Nothing could be clearer than the fact that all those who believed were baptized and that nothing here indicates the baptism of anyone else.

1 Corinthians 1:16 indicates that Paul baptized the household of Stephanas. The surrounding verses do not indicate the requirement of belief. However, 1 Corinthians 16:15 does indicate that belief was associated with the baptisms by stating, that “they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints.” Surely no infant and only true believers would dedicate themselves to the ministry to the saints. Infants have not the capacity to devote themselves to anything, and thus, no infants were present.

The most difficult passage is found in Acts 16:15, which discusses Lydia and states that, “she and her household had been baptized.” Lydia herself had believed, which is evident because she asked Paul to stay if she had been found faithful. This passage does not mention a requirement for belief. However, this passage also does not mention anything about infants being present. Establishing the practice of infant baptism from the silence of a few verses certainly is not wise. Additionally, all indication in this verse leads one to conclude that infants were not present here either because the household is the household of Lydia. Usually, a household is referred to by the man’s name. However, if Lydia were unmarried, then it would be proper to refer to it as her household. Additional evidence comes from the fact that Lydia was a seller of purple from Thyatira which is not near Philippi, where the encounter occurred. What would a woman who was married with small children be doing with her children so far from home? The husband would traditionally operate the business and the wife would keep the children at home.

The household referred to included the servants of Lydia, but no children were mentioned. There is no evidence that Lydia had children or a husband.

With the evidence leaning against any children being present in the household baptisms, the onus is on Pedobaptists to find any Scripture which supports their practice. Actually, Pedobaptism began after the time of the Bible as a human theological tradition to remove the stain of original sin.<sup>3</sup> Infant baptism is a human tradition that should have been long since abolished, because it abrogates the express commandment of our Lord. The Scripture knows nothing of infants being baptized. The scriptural subject of baptism is believers and any alteration in this twists the meaning of baptism so that it is no longer valid.

### **“Infant Faith”**

Some may object as Luther did that infants can have faith. The verse they use for support is that John the Baptist leapt in his mother’s womb when Mary came near. Two comments should readily dismiss this assertion. First, John the Baptist should not be taken as normative for all humans. He was sent by God to prepare the way for Jesus. His father’s mouth was closed until his naming for a lack of faith. Certainly, no logical mind will believe that this is normative for all believers. Second, all other experience confirms that infants have not the capacity for faith. The New Testament clearly states that those who confess with mouths and believe with their hearts will be saved. The Scripture asks how they can believe if they have not heard. How then, I ask, can infants believe who understand not the words used for communication? How could infants be considered believers when they can make no profession and possess no understanding? If infants can believe without understanding and be saved without profession of faith, then it is possible to have anonymous Christians. Just as anonymous Christians were not possible, infants are not believers and are not the proper subject for baptism.

### **Conclusion**

The Bible has clearly demonstrated that believers are the proper subjects of baptism. One may object that just because believers are one subject of baptism, it does no harm to baptism infants who have yet to profess Christ. If this be the case, then why do we not baptize everyone? Why not baptize the Mormon, the Muslim, and the unevangelized heathen? Furthermore, if we need not be restricted in our subject of baptism, then why not baptize our pets. Surely my dog or someone else’s cat is worthy of

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<sup>3</sup>This view resulted from a belief in “original guilt” or “infant guilt” by which infants had to be baptized in order to remove their original guilt in order for them to go to heaven should they die in infancy. Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989), 188, said, “Cyprian of Carthage was the first to argue that infants are baptized because of the ‘contagion of death’ inherited from Adam.” Cyprian also addressed this at the council of Carthage in A.D. 253. See Cyprian, “The Epistles of Cyprian,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 5 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 353-5. This belief can also be traced to Augustine. Neville Clark, “Theology of Baptism,” in *Christian Baptism*, ed. Alec Gilmore (Chicago: Judson Press, 1959), 320, states, “Upon the basis provided by Tertullian and Cyprian in their doctrine of original sin, Ambrose and Augustine superimposed a theology of original guilt. From such guilt infant baptism guaranteed deliverance.” Augustine’s thoughts on the relationship between infant baptism and original sin can be seen in Augustine, “On Original Sin,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol 5 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 237–57.

baptism. Yet no religion which calls itself Christian would support the baptism of animals or of men who profess not Christ. Why then is it that infants who do not profess Christ receive baptism? One may claim it is because of the faith of their parents, but does someone else's faith procure the infant's salvation any more than it procures another's? Of course not! Each individual must accept and confess Christ. What meaning has this extrabiblical religious ritual called infant baptism? At its historical origin, the ritual was said to cleanse the stain of original sin. With Calvin, who recognized the incorrectness of this view, infant baptism became part of the covenant, a continuation from the Old Testament circumcision to the New Testament baptism. With this change, again I ask, "What value has infant baptism?" Does it secure salvation? Certainly not. For many have felt the drops of water as infants and demonstrated no fruit of a Christian. Does it secure an advanced standing or give one a better chance to receive salvation? Certainly not! Other than a continuing human tradition, what value has infant baptism? None. This why Baptists have been so adamant in only accepting the biblical practice of believers' baptism.

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