



The Simple, Profound, Ordinance of

Christian Baptism

by Michael L Drake

Wycliffe Scholastic

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*“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the
name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”*

Matthew 28:19

by Michael L Drake

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About this booklet

Like its title, this booklet is intended to be simple – firstly, as a clear guide to anyone considering the place of baptism in their life or church; and secondly, as a basic help to those trying to sort out the Bible’s teaching from the mixed messages that buffet almost every discussion of baptism.

For those wanting a more comprehensive explanation of baptism I recommend Bobby Jamison’s *Understanding Baptism* from 9Marks. (<https://www.9marks.org/>) It is clear, biblical and pastoral.

Contents

1. Baptism is Simple and Full of Meaning	1
2. Baptism is for Disciples	6
3. Baptism is for Believing Disciples	11
4. Baptism is for Living Disciples	16
5. Baptism is not for Infants	23

*“Don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ
Jesus were baptised into his death?
We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in
order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the
glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”*

~ Romans 6:3,4

It is an Ordinance

Baptism is an “ordinance.” That is, it is something ordained or commanded by Christ as a privilege and blessing for every believer. Christ commands (or ordains) that all who believe in him be baptised: “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”²

When, after his resurrection, Jesus sent his disciples into the world to proclaim the gospel, his instructions included the command to baptise believers.³ Baptism is not, therefore an option for believers: every believer trusting in Jesus for cleansing from sin and for life, is commanded by Jesus to be baptised.

Baptism is an act of obedience in the pattern of what the Apostle Paul called, “the obedience of faith.”⁴ To profess faith in Christ while knowingly disobeying him exposes that faith as an empty imitation,⁵ not faith at all. To profess faith through obedience to known commands of Christ⁶ is to have true faith.

Baptism is one of two ordinances⁷ commanded by Christ to encourage each Christian to live by faith in Jesus because of all that Jesus is, all that Jesus has done, and all that Jesus will do.

Do you believe in Jesus? Then, if you haven’t already been baptised, you need to be. Jesus commands it.

² Acts 2:38

³ Matthew 28:19 [See the next section of this booklet for more details.]

⁴ Romans 1:5 (ESV); or “the obedience that comes from faith” (NIV)

⁵ Just as obedience without faith exposes such “obedience” as empty imitation.

⁶ John 14:15

⁷ The other ordinance Jesus commanded for all believers is *The Lord’s Supper* or *Communion*, in which the church meets together and symbolically eats some bread and drinks some wine or grape juice to “remember Jesus” in the way he showed us. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26) This is explained in another little booklet from Wycliffe Scholastic by Michael L Drake, *The Lord’s Supper*.

It is Full of Meaning

Baptism publicly affirms the Christian's faith that Jesus is *their* Saviour, and begins a life of *discipleship*, a life of following Jesus by learning what he wants, and obeying him through faith.

Baptism pictures conversion and repentance – turning away from the previous life of sin and unbelief that is buried with Christ. And as each baptised believer comes up out of the water, baptism is a reminder that with Christ they have been raised to a new life,⁸ and that now as a child of God, they worship and live by faith in the living, resurrected Jesus.

By having the believer “buried” in water then “raised” out of it, baptism symbolises that the believer has been united with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection.⁹

By washing the whole body in water, baptism demonstrates that through faith in Jesus, a believer is completely and forever washed by the “blood of Christ,” free from sin and guilt, forever made right with God through Christ.¹⁰

By taking part in this simple washing that Christ commanded, baptism brands a believer as Christ's disciple: by faith redeemed by Christ, united to Christ, and living for Christ.¹¹ It marks them as separated from unbelievers, their world and their way of life, affirming each believer's heavenly citizenship.¹²

Baptism not only brands a believer as united to Christ, but also brands believers as united to his people,¹³ the Church of Jesus Christ. It not only aligns the believer with Christ, but with all who have the same faith

⁸ 1 Peter 1:3

⁹ Romans 6:3,4

¹⁰ Romans 5:1

¹¹ 1 Peter 1:18-21; Romans 6:1-23

¹² Philippians 3:20

¹³ 1 Corinthians 12:12,13,27

and Saviour, recognising that they are united as one in Jesus who is their way, their truth and their life.¹⁴

Baptism is a public commitment that the baptised Christian, in fellowship with the Church,¹⁵ is a witness to the rest of the world, including family and friends, that Jesus is Lord, and that “No one comes to the Father except through Jesus.”¹⁶

Baptism points us to Jesus’ gift of the Holy Spirit to every believer as indwelling companion, helper, interceder and guide,¹⁷ transforming them into the likeness of Christ,¹⁸ and encouraging and empowering them in a life of holiness.¹⁹

Baptism is used by the Holy Spirit to assure believers’ consciences that they are saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus, with the certain hope of their own resurrection and eternal life.²⁰

Baptism marks the beginning of a Christian’s discipleship, and the memory of it in the years to come encourages the baptised believer’s ongoing faith and discipleship, as well as encouraging the church to teach them and support them in their faith.

But there is one thing even more significant: for all the blessings we receive through baptism, for all the closeness to Christ that baptism affirms, and for all the faithfulness in a Christian’s life that baptism encourages, Christ and his glory is more important than us or any benefits we enjoy through obedience.

¹⁴ John 14:6

¹⁵ Philippians 2:19

¹⁶ John 14:6

¹⁷ John 14:16-20; 14:26; 16:13

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 3:17,18

¹⁹ Galatians 5:16-18

²⁰ 1 Peter 3:21

Christ's honour is at stake when he calls for obedience, and to be baptised because he commands it, irrespective of anything we gain, is to truly love²¹ and honour him.

Believer, Baptism is for You!

Baptism is all those things, but they all come down to one thing: doing it!

If you believe in Jesus, be baptised and be blessed, because that is his way of honouring and obeying him, it is his way of showing your faith in him and separation from an unbelieving world, it is his way of being branded as his in fellowship with his people, and it is his way of strengthening their faith and yours.

²¹ John 14:15,23

2 Baptism is for Disciples

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Matthew 28:19,20

After his resurrection, with the authority that belonged to him as the risen Son of God,²² Jesus commissioned (or gave a mission to) his disciples as his authorised representatives, with this command: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”²³

It is no surprise then, that on the Day of Pentecost, when his listeners asked Peter what they should do in response to the gospel, he said “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”²⁴ He could have said, “Repent and believe in Jesus,” but by saying, “Repent and be baptised,” Peter called on those new believers to *show* their faith by their actions²⁵ in the way Jesus had commanded.

²² Matthew 28:18

²³ Matthew 28:19,20

²⁴ Acts 2:38

²⁵ James 2:14-26

Everyone who repents and believes in Jesus has eternal life and the forgiveness of their sin.²⁶ Baptism gives expression to such repentance and faith. But something else is needed for true discipleship: they are to be baptised, *and* they are to be taught to obey everything Jesus has commanded. Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”²⁷ You “hold to” Jesus’ teaching when, having learnt or been taught it, you put it into practice. You obey him.

Disciples are made when people repent and believe in Jesus, when their faith is expressed in baptism, when they are taught everything that Jesus commanded, and when they obey that teaching because they live by faith in him. That makes baptism an integral part of being a faithful disciple of Jesus.

They Knew What Baptism Was

On the Day of Pentecost Peter, did not have to explain what baptism was. For centuries before Jesus’ day, Jews had been practising a number of different “baptisms” by being immersed in water to symbolise cleansing and repentance. These baptisms or immersions were done for a variety of different reasons, including as one of three signs²⁸ used to acknowledge the new faith of Gentiles (non-Jews) who became converts to Judaism.²⁹

That’s why, when John the Baptist called for a baptism of repentance, his hearers knew what he meant. Crowds from the whole region came to John, and “Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River.”³⁰ They knew that immersion in the river waters meant repentance and turning to God in faith.

²⁶ John 3:15-18; 20:31

²⁷ John 8:31,32

²⁸ A sacrifice, circumcision and baptism.

²⁹ According to Jewish tradition, this “proselyte baptism,” had been practised for centuries before Jesus’ day.

³⁰ Matthew 3:6

So the people who heard the gospel on the Day of Pentecost were already familiar with baptism and its link to repentance and faith. Those who accepted the gospel message, believed in Jesus and were baptised, all three thousand of them!³¹

But, in obedience to Jesus' command, Peter makes *this* baptism different from other baptisms by saying the baptism of Jesus' disciples must be "In the name of Jesus Christ." Christian baptism is not the same as any other "washing" or baptism: it is Christ's.

In the Name of Jesus

To baptise "in the name of Jesus" is not to invoke some magical formula.³² It is to act on Jesus' authority as Jesus' representative doing what Jesus commanded. The church baptises believers in Jesus' name because Jesus gave them his authority to represent him with his sign affirming a believer's faith.

Some are confused by the apparent difference between Jesus' command to baptise in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the two times Peter baptised "in the name of Jesus."³³ But this is to misunderstand the unity of the Trinity. Whatever Jesus does he does in harmony with the Father and the Spirit.³⁴

Therefore, to do anything in the name of Jesus *is* to do it on the authority and as the representative of God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, because some false teachers leverage Peter's use of "In the name of Jesus" to deny God's Trinitarian nature, it is probably prudent to use the wording of Matthew 28:19: "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit," in baptisms.

³¹ Acts 2:41

³² cf Acts 19:13-17

³³ Acts 2:38 and 10:48

³⁴ John 5:19-23; 8:28,29; 10:15,38; 14:9-11; 16:15,23

But on both occasions that Peter baptised “in the name of Jesus,” he had a reason for highlighting Jesus, even though both the Father and the Holy Spirit are plainly present and involved.

On both occasions, Peter was speaking to those who already believed in God, teaching them that Jesus is the promised Saviour for Jews and Gentiles, the one who gifts the Holy Spirit to all who believe in him. By baptising them “in the name of Jesus Christ,” he highlighted the fact that *Jesus* brings saving grace to all who believe. These are truly baptisms on the authority of and representing God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Following Jesus

At the start of his ministry, Jesus came to John the Baptist to be baptised.³⁵ John’s baptism was about repenting from sin and preparing for the coming Saviour.³⁶ That Saviour had now arrived, and was asking for baptism! Since Jesus was without sin³⁷ and had nothing to repent of, John tried to prevent him.³⁸ But Jesus said it was “proper” for him to be baptised, to “fulfil all righteousness.”³⁹

Jesus’ baptism fulfilled all righteousness in three ways:

Firstly, Jesus came to fulfil everything in Old Testament,⁴⁰ especially in his death and resurrection, which baptism symbolises. *His* baptism was a symbol of the *coming* fulfilment of God’s promise that he, God’s Son, would die to secure righteousness in place of sin and guilt, and life in place of death, for all who believe.

Secondly, he was sent as man to identify with us as our Saviour. Just as we identify with him through our baptism, he identifies with us through his

³⁵ Matthew 3:13-17.

³⁶ Acts 19:4

³⁷ Hebrews 4:15

³⁸ Matthew 3:14 (ESV)

³⁹ Matthew 3:15

⁴⁰ Matthew 5:17

baptism. Jesus made baptism his public brand, a brand belonging to him and all disciples who are united to him and follow him.

Thirdly, while repentance involves *turning from* sin, (what Jesus did not need to do), it also involves *committing to* obedient holiness. In his baptism, Jesus committed himself to obeying his Father. With his Father's declaration of approval and gift of the Holy Spirit,⁴¹ Jesus' baptism has that aspect of repentance, a sign and affirmation of his being his Father's disciple in the way our baptism is a sign and affirmation of our being Jesus' disciples.

To be Jesus' disciple is to follow him. Just as Jesus was baptised, his disciples are to follow him, being baptised like him.

⁴¹ Matthew 3:16,17

3 Baptism is for Believing Disciples

“So those who received his word were baptised, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.”

Acts 2:41

In the book of Acts there are nine accounts of baptisms.⁴²

Repentance and Faith

In Acts 2:37-41, on the Day of Pentecost, 3,000 circumcised men accepted Peter’s message that Jesus was their Lord and Messiah whom they’d crucified. They repented and were baptised in Jesus’ name. In Acts 8:12 “both men and women” in Samaria who believed “the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ,” were baptised. In Acts 19:1-5, about twelve men in Ephesus who had earlier been baptised with John’s baptism of repentance, heard the gospel and were baptised in Jesus’ name.

Acts 8:26 describes how an Ethiopian was reading from Isaiah as he drove his chariot along the road. Philip jumped into the chariot with him, and starting in Isaiah, told him the good news about Jesus. When the Ethiopian saw water he asked why he shouldn’t be baptised. With no reason to doubt the man’s faith, Philip went with him down into the water and baptised him there.

⁴² They are, in the order discussed in this booklet: Acts 2:37-41; 8:12; 19:1-5; 8:26; 9:1-19 & 22:6-14; 10:1-11:18; 18:8; 16:14,15; 16:27-34.

The Apostle Paul's baptism was a little different. Before his name was changed from Saul to Paul, he was violently persecuting Jesus' disciples. As described in Acts 9:1-19 and 22:6-14, while on the road to Damascus, the risen Jesus confronted Saul, calling him from persecution to discipleship. Blinded in this encounter, Saul obeyed Jesus, continued to Damascus where he received his sight back through prayer, and was baptised.

The account of baptisms at Caesarea in Acts 10 and 11 ends with the statement, "Even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life,"⁴³ but begins when God brings Peter to a large gathering at the Centurian Cornelius' house to whom he preached the good news of Jesus. The Holy Spirit "came on all who heard,"⁴⁴ so Peter and the Jews with him concluded that, with the Holy Spirit given to Gentiles, they must have also been granted faith and repentance: they were all baptised as believers.

The Gift of the Holy Spirit

Among the differences in these six accounts of baptism there are at least two common features: in each case baptism marked repentance and faith. But another common theme comes to the surface: baptism is also linked to the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Of these six baptisms, five are specifically linked to the gift of the Holy Spirit: the baptisms on the Day of Pentecost, in Ephesus, the Samaritans, the Gentiles in Caesarea, and Paul.⁴⁵ In three cases the Holy Spirit came *in conjunction* with baptism. The Samaritans on the other hand received the Spirit some time *after* their baptisms,⁴⁶ while the Caesareans

⁴³ Acts 11:18

⁴⁴ Acts 10:44

⁴⁵ The fact that the gift of the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in connection with the Ethiopian's baptism does not mean he didn't also receive the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁶ Acts 8:16

received the Spirit *before* their baptisms, which was evidence that they should be baptised.

It is clear that the gift of God's Holy Spirit coincided with repentance, faith and baptism. Yet baptism didn't convey the Spirit – rather it indicated conversion and the validity of the baptism of those given the Spirit, whether before, at, or after baptism.

So baptism points to a believer's being given the Holy Spirit in conjunction with repentance and faith. It signifies that the Holy Spirit is given to believers along with the other things baptism signifies. This fulfils Jesus' promise that he would send his Spirit to be with his disciples forever.⁴⁷

Not only does the Spirit regenerate believers, implanting a new nature and a new heart with their new birth, the Spirit's presence with disciples is so certain that Paul says, "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ."⁴⁸ The Spirit is not merely a companion beside disciples as a helper: he lives in *every* disciple as if the disciple is a temple of God,⁴⁹ and he lives in the church.⁵⁰

God has made his gift of the Spirit his "seal"⁵¹ or signature that disciples are his.⁵² This effective, inward, spiritual seal of the New Covenant⁵³ replaces the Old Covenant's failed outward seal of circumcision. The Spirit's indwelling of believers, "is how we know that Jesus lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us."⁵⁴

⁴⁷ John 14:16

⁴⁸ Romans 8:9

⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19

⁵⁰ Ephesians 2:22

⁵¹ The wax seal marked with a King's sign, guaranteeing authenticity.

⁵² Note that this is contrary to some who claim that *baptism* is a seal of faith. "Seal" is only used in the New Testament for the Spirit and never for baptism.

⁵³ Ephesians 4:30

⁵⁴ 1 John 3:24

Household Baptisms

In the remaining three accounts of baptism in Acts, three new believers and their households come to Christ. In Acts 18:8, Crispus, the synagogue leader in Corinth, and his entire household believed. Crispus was baptised.⁵⁵ A large number of Corinthians also believed and were baptised – it is generally assumed that Crispus’ believing household was baptised with them.

In Acts 16:14-15 Lydia, an apparently wealthy business woman in Philippi, believed and was baptised. Members of her household were also baptised. Shortly after this, Acts 16:27-34 describes how a jailer in Philippi and his whole household were baptised because “he had come to believe in God – he and his whole household.” In 1 Corinthians 1:15 Paul also mentions the baptism of the household of Stephanas, all believers.⁵⁶

Unlike other baptisms in Acts, the text is silent about those baptised from Lydia’s household having faith in Christ. Some baby-baptisers hear in the silence a call to baptise infants. Given the context, and that baptism is an expression of faith in Christ (noted in *every* other baptism in Acts), any normal reading of Acts would take this unexplained silence as obviously aligned with the established pattern, and that those baptised were believers.⁵⁷

Jesus’ command to make and baptise disciples, and the way in which that command was put into obedient practice in Acts, makes clear that baptism is for believers, those who believe in Jesus as their Saviour, and for believers only.

⁵⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:14

⁵⁶ 1 Corinthians 16:15

⁵⁷ See pp 27 ff of this booklet for explanation and evaluation of how baby-baptisers put their words into the Bible’s silence.

Living in the Light of God's Word

The baptised disciple, having been taught Christ's words, treasures them,⁵⁸ knowing that in them is the light by which disciples live: "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path."⁵⁹ This is not just about learning quotes from Christ, for he is God through whom *every* word of the Bible "is God-breathed," for equipping disciples to live faithful for Christ.⁶⁰ Baptised disciples not only identify with Christ for cleansing from sin, but as their way, truth and life. Having been taught God's word, they put it into practice. Their delight is to "not merely listen to the word," but to "do what it says."⁶¹ They live their lives in Christ "as they have been taught."⁶²

⁵⁸ Psalm 119:11

⁵⁹ Psalm 119:105

⁶⁰ 2 Timothy 3:16

⁶¹ James 1:22

⁶² Colossians 2:6,7

4 Baptism is for Living Disciples

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

Romans 6:4

Baptism marks not only being cleansed from sin through union with Christ in his death, but a new life lived for God. Every disciple of Jesus is being transformed into the likeness of Jesus,⁶⁵ putting “on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”⁶⁴ Baptism brands the disciple as a believer, alive by faith through Christ, living by faith for Christ. Ten places in the Epistles,⁶⁵ discussed below, link discipleship to baptism.

Dead, Buried and Alive!

In Colossians 2:12, Paul declares that in baptism disciples are united with Christ, being buried and raised with him. In Paul’s way of writing, it can mistakenly appear that *baptism* is what unites disciples with Christ. But it is clear from the whole passage (where he also says disciples were dead and that all disciples have been circumcised), that he is using figurative or picture language. Baptism is a symbol or picture of God

⁶⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:18

⁶⁴ Ephesians 4:24

⁶⁵ They are, in the order discussed in this booklet: Colossians 2; Romans 6; Titus 3:5; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 4:5; Galatians 3:28; 1 Corinthians 1:13-17; 1 Corinthians 15:29; 1 Corinthians 10:2; 1 Peter 3:20-21.

uniting believers through faith in Christ to Christ, and to his death, burial and life.

Paul then explains disciples' union with Christ means that

- disciples should set their minds on Christ, not earthly things;
- disciples should not replace faith with rules and regulations;
- disciples should “put to death” their earthly nature; and that
- disciples should “put on the new self.”

Similarly, Paul begins Romans 6 by declaring that disciples, having been baptised into Jesus' death, cannot wilfully go on sinning: they have died to sin. But, he says, just as baptism symbolises being buried with Christ, it also symbolises that disciples were raised with him to life so that they “too may live a new life.”⁶⁶

Here in Romans 6 Paul adds to his list in Colossians of what the new life of disciples united to Christ involves:

- disciples are not slaves to sin but are slaves to righteousness;
- disciples have no need to let sin reign in their mortal bodies;
- disciples are no longer mastered by death or sin;
- disciples are to count themselves dead to sin and alive to God;
- disciples live as those certain of resurrection with Christ.

Act and Meaning are Linked

These two passages demonstrate that the meaning of baptism is linked to the act of baptism: immersion or “burial” in water. Although a precedent for immersion is found in John's baptism, and in Jewish proselyte and purification immersions, the symbolism itself necessitates immersion. Accordingly, New Testament Christian baptism is by complete immersion, picturing disciples' union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection.

⁶⁶ Romans 6:4

The English translation of “baptise” and “baptism” is “to immerse or wash all over.” Those words have never been accurately translated in English Bibles. “Baptise” and “baptism” are invented words that hide the idea of immersion,⁶⁷ possibly with the intention of distinguishing the special nature of baptism from ordinary washing. The use of those invented words for “immersion” in the Bible is then used by some to avoid immersion altogether. Instead, they attempt to justify sprinkling or pouring water over a child or adult’s head, calling it baptism. The mental gymnastics involved to do that just don’t hold water.

Only the obedience of immersion symbolises dying with Christ to an old life, being raised with Christ in new life, and “the washing of regeneration”⁶⁸ through faith in Christ. Had John the Baptist, or Philip with the Ethiopian, not needed to go into the water to baptise by immersion, they could have used a bowl of water and splashed everyone without anyone wading into water!

Baptism Means Church Membership

Baptism symbolises union with Christ *and his church* in being baptised by the Holy Spirit into one “body” of the church⁶⁹ in which all work together in service and worship, encouraging each other,⁷⁰ caring for all with love,⁷¹ and witnessing to Christ. Jesus’ commission to make disciples was given to his disciples, meaning that *every* baptised disciple is baptised a disciple-maker.

Every mention of baptism in the Epistles assumes baptism and church membership go together, just as in most cases in Acts, baptism

⁶⁷ When the Bible was translated into Latin, the NT Greek “baptizo” was made into a new Latin word with the same spelling. English translations follow the tradition. The original Anglican Prayer Book recognised this, requiring “dipping” into water (only permitting “pouring” if the one being baptised is “too weak .. to endure it.”)

⁶⁸ Titus 3:5

⁶⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:13

⁷⁰ 1 Thessalonians 5:11

⁷¹ 1 John 3:11-20

initiated disciples into a new or existing local church. Regardless of status or heritage, every disciple undergoes the same baptism, there being “one Lord, one faith, *one baptism*.”⁷² Baptism signifies that every disciple is so “clothed in Christ” that in the church “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁷³

Baptism and church membership belong together. Most churches rightly have a process by which elders and members consider and approve applications for membership. Since baptism initiates church membership for new believers, their membership is best processed by the church before their baptism, so that they can be welcomed into membership at their baptism.

Although there can be valid exceptions, such as the Ethiopian in Acts 8 who is left to complete his journey to Gaza without joining a church, it follows that baptism is in danger of being misused if a believer’s union with the church is not recognised through membership at baptism. This can happen when baptism is conducted independently of a church, or when a church baptises a believer without welcoming them into membership then.

Talking About Other Things

Three times in 1 Corinthians, Paul references baptism to talk about other things. Firstly, stressing the unity of Christ, he delights that he baptised such a small number of disciples that there could never be a cult of “Baptism in the name of Paul.”⁷⁴

More puzzling is Paul’s reference to people being “baptised on behalf of the dead.”⁷⁵ He did not advocate this abuse of baptism. He was

⁷² Ephesians 4:5 (my emphasis)

⁷³ Galatians 3:28

⁷⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:13-17

⁷⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:29

refuting some in Corinth who did not believe in a resurrection, but baptised for dead people (he doesn't explain how!) who they believed were not going to be raised. That, says Paul, is illogical, and makes faith in Christ futile! No, he says, Christ has been raised, proving that there will be a resurrection, and that disciples have life in Christ now, *and* in the resurrection.

Earlier he likened the Israelites, escaping Egypt between the waters of the Red Sea high on either side of them,⁷⁶ as being “baptised into Moses.”⁷⁷ Theirs was immersion (aka baptism) into Moses and the law, not into Christ. Paul sees their immersion in the sea as a sign of their being saved to live life by the Mosaic law.

Similarly, Peter says that the water in baptism – symbolising being washed and entering a new life – is in some ways like the flood waters of Noah's day.⁷⁸ *That* water symbolised God's saving the believers in the ark from judgement into new life. In the same way, he says, “baptism now saves you,” not as if baptism itself saves, anymore than the flood saved Noah and his companions. Baptism's water, like the flood, does not wash dirt or sin away, but is a symbol of the “pledge of a clear conscience toward God.” The pledge that clears the conscience, symbolised by baptism, is the resurrection of Christ. It proved he paid sin's price and pledged a verdict of “not guilty” on Judgement Day.

Baptism symbolises cleansing of the conscience that saves from the enslaving bondage of guilt, sin⁷⁹ and death,⁸⁰ so that disciples can be *living* disciples, living “the rest of their earthly lives ... for the will of God,”⁸¹ living “lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith

⁷⁶ Exodus 14:19-29

⁷⁷ 1 Corinthians 10:2

⁷⁸ 1 Peter 3:21

⁷⁹ Romans 6:6,16

⁸⁰ Hebrews 2:15

⁸¹ 1 Peter 4:2

as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”⁸² Disciples are made alive in Christ to be *living* disciples: disciples who live a new life in Christ by faith.

Living in the Shadow of the Cross

But there is one thing the examples of baptism don't make obvious, although it was obvious to all who were baptised: baptism costs! Their baptisms meant separation from family, discrimination in society, and even expulsion from their community – and for many, it would mean persecution and death.

Few readers of this booklet will experience those extremes, although around the world, that is what many, perhaps most, newly baptised disciples can expect. Yet there *is* a cost to discipleship for *every* believer: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”⁸³

Jesus makes this call to take up our cross, denying self and following him, twice. In this quotation from Luke 9, Jesus puts the call in the context of being unashamed of him, of having nowhere to call home, of persevering in discipleship, and of losing life itself.⁸⁴ Then in Luke 14 he makes giving up *everything*, including those closest to us,⁸⁵ essential to discipleship, and warns of the need to count the cost before becoming a disciple.

Identifying with Jesus through baptism means “un-identifying” with, or renouncing any claim or commitment to *everything* and *everyone* else ahead of Christ. If or when we then, through persecution or sacrifice,

⁸² Colossians 2:6,7

⁸³ Luke 9:23; 14:27. cf Mark 8:34

⁸⁴ Luke 9:23-27 & 57-62

⁸⁵ Luke 14:26-33 (Note that by “hating” in this text, Jesus is not demanding the bitter or angry attitude we normally associate with hatred, but the complete unreserved commitment to put Christ ahead of even those we love dearly.)

lose anything, it should be as if what is lost had already been lost.⁸⁶ Baptism symbolises that the world and everything it offers is now crucified to the disciple,⁸⁷ who considers it gone, a virtual deposit on what might be lost later ... and for all disciples there *will be* a “later” in some measure.⁸⁸

True discipleship involves living a life of *sacrifice* in conformity to God’s will.⁸⁹ To “take up their cross” is to be shamed as was Christ who, as a man condemned to die, had to pick up and carry his cross in a public shaming,⁹⁰ before he was publicly shamed on the cross. Jesus calls on his disciples to take up their cross daily, being willing to be shamed for him through the scorn of others,⁹¹ metaphorically losing their life⁹² daily for him.

Yet the promise of Christ is that not only is there a richer life awaiting every disciple, but that *this present life* of everything lost for Christ is richer than anything we have lost.⁹³ Every disciple lives in the shadow of the cross, its cost, and its victory.

⁸⁶ Philippians 3:7,8

⁸⁷ Galatians 2:20

⁸⁸ 2 Timothy 3:12

⁸⁹ Romans 12:1,2

⁹⁰ Albeit Simon of Cyrene substituted for the weakened Jesus – Luke 23:26

⁹¹ Hebrews 12:2

⁹² Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26

⁹³ Mark 10:29,30

5 Baptism is not for Infants

*“Peter said, ‘Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.’
... Those who accepted his message were baptised.”*

Acts 2:38-41

Many churches baptise infants who don’t, and (on account of their age) can’t, express the repentance, faith, and commitment to discipleship that is the biblical basis for baptism. Among the ways used to justify baptising infants without faith are:

1. Belief that baptism “makes” Christians. Roman Catholics and some others believe that baptising infants removes their original sin, gives faith and new birth, making them Christians. But the Bible declares baptism a sign of what God *has already done* in giving new birth through faith, a sign a person *has repented and is believing* in Christ. No ritual can make those things happen.

2. Belief that baptism conveys something from God. Many call baptism a “sacrament,” changing it from being a sign of a person’s faith, to being a conduit of grace by which God mystically infuses, conveys, secures or makes possible a particular promised blessing. Some avoid the word sacrament, describing baptism as “a means of grace.” Either way, it is believed God is committed to doing something to the infant on account of baptism. Depending on the beliefs involved, that could be anything from

regeneration to “a promise of benefit” said to belong to the sign of baptism.⁹⁴

But the Bible declares baptism to be a sign of what God *has already done* in giving new birth through faith, a sign a person *has repented and is believing* in Christ. No ritual can make those things happen. Baptism does not secure or convey grace or salvation: it symbolises them. It is an ordinance, not a sacrament.

3. Belief that others can believe for the infant. Sometimes parents or others are said to have repentance and faith for the unbelieving infant who one day will repent and believe for themselves. Again, this has nothing to do with the Bible’s description of baptism as a sign of a person’s actual repentance, faith, and new life.

4. Belief that the New Covenant works like the Old. It is sometimes argued that children of believers should be regarded as members of the New Covenant and its church by birth, without faith of their own, just as under the Old Covenant, children descended from Abraham were members of that Covenant and the community of God’s people by birth without faith.

That doesn’t make sense! Membership in the Old Covenant community of Israel did not secure forgiveness from sin and union with Christ,⁹⁵ whereas membership in the New Covenant is exclusively for those who have received forgiveness of sin and union with Christ. God not only says that the New Covenant is not like the Old Covenant,⁹⁶ but also that salvation and union with Christ is not by “natural descent,”⁹⁷ but by faith alone. The

⁹⁴ As the *Westminster Confession* obscurely puts it, before listing the promised benefits that are supposed to belong to baptised infants including regeneration, remission of sins, ingrafting into Christ, and membership of Christ’s church.

⁹⁵ Romans 9:6-8

⁹⁶ Jeremiah 31:31 ff; Hebrews 7:18; 8:7 ff; 9:15

⁹⁷ John 1:12,13

falsely assumed membership in the New Covenant and union with Christ by birth is wrongly used as a reason for baptising infants.

5. Belief that baptism has the same symbolism as circumcision. It is claimed that as baby boys were circumcised, baby boys *and* girls should be baptised. The logic is not easy to follow! While both circumcision and baptism relate to justification by faith and transformation of hearts,⁹⁸ they have dominant distinctives. They are not interchangeable. Circumcision is a sign of men born into national/ethnic Israel by natural descent *regardless of faith, separated* from all others. Baptism is a sign of men *and* women born into Christ's church in spiritual birth *by faith* (not natural descent), *united* with believers from every national/ethnic group.

If circumcision and baptism mean the same, Peter was wrong to tell circumcised believers at Pentecost to be baptised since, in circumcision, they already had the sign of regeneration, repentance and faith. But circumcision, signifying bondage to law and the *need* for regeneration, repentance and faith, no longer matters.⁹⁹ Baptism, signifying the *present reality* of regeneration, repentance, faith and freedom in Christ, is different and does matter.

6. Belief that God promised to save believers' children. On that basis, it is claimed, children of believers who are without evidence of faith should be baptised as a sign of promised or actual salvation. Sometimes this is linked to the idea that God is said to have promised, in a *Covenant of Grace*, that children are saved, and united to Christ and his church through believing parents.¹⁰⁰

Such a belief is also often linked to a misreading of Peter's *Day of Pentecost* sermon in which Peter tells those listening that forgiveness of sins and the

⁹⁸ Deuteronomy 10:16

⁹⁹ Galatians 5:1-6; 1 Corinthians 7:19

¹⁰⁰ Many Christians call the New Covenant *The Covenant of Grace*, but the term is used differently in *Covenant Theology*, formulated after the Reformation, that sees one Covenant of Grace in all ages, that includes children through their parents.

gift of the Holy Spirit is promised to *all* people who repent and are baptised. It is promised to those listening, to their children, and to those “far off.”¹⁰¹ God has made that promise to all who come to him by faith – the Jews present that day, their children and the Gentiles who were far-off or separated from God and his people.¹⁰² *All who are baptised in repentance and faith in Christ*, will receive God’s forgiveness and Spirit.

Some infant-baptisers misread Peter’s statement as if he said that those who believe receive forgiveness for themselves *and* their children, so that children of believing parents should be baptised as if actually (or certain to be) forgiven and united to Christ. The promise to those “far off” Gentiles, is ignored. But the promise is that *whoever repents and is baptised* (his listeners, their children, or the far off Gentiles) will receive the promised Spirit. If the promise justifies the baptism of *children* without repentance and faith, it also justifies *far off Gentiles* being baptised without repentance and faith because they have the same promise as the children. That’s nonsense!

7. Belief that household baptisms prove infants were baptised. Infant-baptisers frequently claim that, “Since households *always* included infants, infants *must* have been baptised.” The argument fails on both assumptions.

There are three household baptisms in Acts. Everyone in the household of Crispus in Corinth who was baptised, believed (Acts 18:8). The same applies in Acts 16:34 where a jailer in Philippi “and his whole household,” believed. If “every household included infants,” then the infants in those two households were believers. More likely, there were no infants in those households – so infants were not in *every* household. This is consistent with the use of “household” in John 4:53 where a whole household believed Jesus. Similarly, in Acts 10:2, the household of Cornelius all feared God.

¹⁰¹ Genesis 22:18

¹⁰² Ephesians 2:11-13

In the third household baptism, in Philippi (Acts 16:33-15), the text is silent about faith in the household that was baptised with Lydia. Some baby-baptisers hear in this silence a siren-shout to baptise infants. Listening to silence however, is no way to hear what the Bible is saying, especially when what is heard conflicts with what the Bible *does* say through precept and precedence.

Since *no other* example of baptism included infants, and since *every other* example of baptism, including the other two household baptisms, involved faith, it is consistent to take it that all who were baptised with Lydia believed. Infants aside, if all in the household were baptised, either they all believed or some adults who didn't believe were baptised. That defies logic, just as it defies logic that Lydia's household *must* have included infants, who *must* have been baptised. There is no basis for baptising infants because believers in three households in Acts were baptised.

8. Belief that church community is the same as union with Christ and church membership. Only those united to Christ by faith and new birth can be members of his church. Nevertheless, a biblical church welcomes unbelievers into its community, sharing care and the gospel with them, loving them as neighbours. These unbelievers may participate in the outward life of the church without participating by faith in the spiritual reality of union with Christ and with church members. But participation in the church community does not unite them to Christ or make them members of his church – that can only come through faith.

Why then are unbelievers – adults and children– encouraged to worship God through prayer, hymn singing, and the like? Because worship is not about what we get but what we give to God, who is worthy of our worship, and commands it. So we encourage all children and adults to worship God as he should be worshiped, and the church's hope is that as they faithlessly confront God in his majesty, righteousness and grace, they will be led by the Spirit to repent and believe.

Some baby-baptisers wrongly change baptism from symbolising union with Christ through faith into symbolising participation in the “church community or family” without faith. With inconsistent sentimentality, such baptism is only made available to children without faith, not to adults without faith. That devalues and distorts baptism, fudging God’s distinction between believers and unbelievers, and hides God’s call to repentance and faith.

The Bible makes baptism a sign of a person’s repentance and union with Christ and his church *through their faith*. Baptism without faith, even for babies, is inconceivable. No faith, no immersion, means no baptism!

Does that mean those previously “baptised” by sprinkling or pouring need to be rebaptised by immersion? Does that mean those who have been “baptised” as infants without faith need to be rebaptised? Without immersion, or faith, they weren’t baptised. If they weren’t baptised, they can’t be *rebaptised* ... but they can still be baptised! Regardless of false imitations of obedience to Christ’s command they have previously taken part in, every disciple is called to believe and be immersed.

9. Belief that ritual can secure children’s eternity. Baptising infants does not secure them in Christ: only faith does that. Some parents nonetheless hope that a ritual *Infant Dedication*, a sort of dry infant-baptism for which the New Testament offers neither precept nor example, can force God’s protection or secure special blessing for a child. But no ritual, nor the participation of any priest or pastor, can twist God’s arm! The prayer of faith looks to God for his grace to us, not for his obedience to us.

Parents should be encouraged to give thanks for their children, praying for God’s grace to them. Their church should join them constantly in such prayer. Asking Jesus to bless little children is a good thing.¹⁰⁵ Such prayer should feature in every church’s ministry, particularly in thanking God for

¹⁰⁵ Matthew 19:13-15

newborn children and praying for them and their parents. But parents' greatest hope for their children is not in a ritual dedication or infant baptism, but in nurturing them "in the training and instruction of the Lord."¹⁰⁴

Infant dedication is not necessary, as if an ordinance; nor has it any biblical symbolism. It does not secure the infant in faith or a safe eternity, as if a sacrament. No child's soul is in danger through lack of such dedication, and nor is any child's soul secured by it.

In fact, no truly believing disciple's soul is in danger through lack of baptism, nor is any believing disciple's soul secured by it. But Christ is honoured, disciples are encouraged, and the church is strengthened when disciples and churches take up their calling to make disciples, and baptise them in faithfulness to Christ, doing the things God ordains, the way God ordains.

¹⁰⁴ Ephesians 6:4

End Note

Baptism is a wonderful gift of God that, used faithfully, honours Christ, encouraging believers and churches in their faith, hope, holiness, and witness.

Baptism is God's way for believers to declare their faith in Jesus as their Saviour, and identify with him as his disciples.

Baptism, in which those who believe in Jesus are immersed or "buried" in and raised from water, symbolises that their old ways of life are buried with Jesus through his death, that their sin and guilt are washed away through his sacrifice, and that through his resurrection they are raised to new life as his disciples, committed to learning and obeying in faith all he has commanded.

Baptism brands disciples as Christ's, being baptised like him, united to him and his church, and conspicuously separated from the unbelieving world. It testifies to disciples, to the church, and to the world, that having life now and eternally through Christ, disciples are called to live for Christ with Christ by faith in Christ their Lord as "the way, the truth and the life."¹⁰⁵

This booklet ends as it began, affirming that Christian baptism is a simple, joyful ordinance, but one of profound meaning, that Jesus commanded each of his disciples to undertake.

Believer, disciple, Christian: baptism is for you.

Christ commands it, faith obeys.

¹⁰⁵ John 14:6

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