

The Subjects of Baptism: A History of Controversy.

Abstract. It has always been the desire of any religious body to adhere to a set of practices that tend to define it, and the Christian church is no exception to this rule. Over the history of the Christian church (hereafter referred to as the “church,”) many of the practices of the early church have been integrated into church life (1) to the extent that the early practice is understood, and (2) to the extent that any such practice seems reasonable and practical. For example, the practice of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism that was an integral part of the early church has been preserved through the ages; a reasonable act considering Jesus’ clear and direct instruction to do so (1 Cor. 11:23-26, Matt. 28:19). However, the manner and mode of that preservation is often characterized by significant variance in application. Due to differences in interpretation and opinion, different church groups apply the acts of the early church in different ways. A comparison of the wide array of church practice is certainly outside the scope of this study, so we will concentrate a single, yet non-trivial example: the ordinance or sacrament of baptism. Furthermore, we will look at only one facet of this act: the subject of baptism. We will observe three distinct opinions concerning the “proper” subject of baptism. As we do, we should be reminded that the fourteenth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans reminds us not to think of ourselves as any better than another based upon such differences in practice. Yet, a study of these practices can be illuminating, and help the theologian to (1) be better informed of current religious practice, (2) be better affirmed in closely held viewpoints, and (3) be more tolerant of variant viewpoints held by others.

The Subject of Baptism: A History of Controversy.

“Baptism points back to the work of God, and forward to the life of faith.” (J. Alice Moyer.”

The scene is familiar to the most moderately disciplined Christian: John the Baptist, dressed in the attire that was appropriate to his dwelling in the wilderness of Judea is baptizing his followers in the Jordan River, as was his practice. After rebuking the religious leaders for their lack of repentance, Jesus comes forward to be baptized. In stark contrast, the Wilderness Prophet is surprised and confused by this request, since it is coming from the One whom he recognizes as the “Lamb of God” (John 1:29); one he feels is not needful of such an act of repentance. However, the humbled John relents, and Jesus is baptized. The heavens were opened unto Jesus, “and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And a voice from heaven, saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased’” (Matt. 3:16 - 17, NIV.) This is the experience that begins Jesus’ earthy ministry.

Another familiar scene takes place as the last act of Jesus’ earthly ministry. The eleven disciples traveled to a mountain in Galilee where Jesus had previously directed, and Jesus spoke his last words, his commission of the disciples, and instructions to the church:

“All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, *even* unto the end of the world.” (Matt. 28:18-20, KJV.)

The command is to make disciples, and to baptize those disciples under the authority of the Holy Trinity. We see baptism as Jesus' testimony at the beginning of His ministry, and we see baptism in Jesus' final and distinctive command to the disciples and to the church. It is only reasonable that, from the days of the early church, the practice of baptism has been preserved as one its most consistent and most important observances.

This importance placed upon baptism is not questioned by the church. In a sincere effort to be obedient to Jesus' command to baptize disciples, the church has sought to copy what it has interpreted as the means and mode of baptism used in the early church. However, the writings of the New Testament are not comprehensive research documents, and much of what the church has actually applied has been determined by logical inference. Consequently, the actual practices associated with baptism are subject to variation from church group to church group. Unfortunately, the church often becomes quite dogmatic in its practices and such differences can divide the body of Christ, even leading to the persecution of one another. One need only do a little research into the treatment of the Anabaptists by the early Roman Catholic church to find some examples of extreme persecution based on this one tenet alone. Even today, some denominations consider their own means and mode of baptism to be the only correct way, and use their defined practice to distinguish and separate themselves from others, declaring those others as being incorrect, or intolerant. As we observe these differences we must not forget Paul's admonition in his letter to the Romans that calls upon us to fully accept one another regardless of differences in religious practice as long as each sincerely believes he is honoring the Lord in that practice (Romans 14:5-14.)

There are two distinct controversies concerning the practice of baptism. One concerns the mode of baptism whereby some groups argue that baptism must be characterized by the complete immersion of the baptized individual in water. Others argue that such immersion is not necessary, that a simple anointing, or sprinkling will do. A second controversy concerns the subjects of baptism whereby some groups argue that baptism is intended to be a testimony of faith, practiced on confessing believers. Others argue that such a limitation is not necessary, calling upon the infant children of believers to also be baptized. It is this latter controversy that we shall investigate in the remainder of this article. Opinions are firm and varied on this issue. Gore states that “nearly all Christian denominations practice infant baptism,”¹ yet many do not, including Baptists who make up a large portion of the non-Vatican Christian body.

Much of what we practice in our faith has been the church’s response to dogmatic tradition developed through questionable interpretations of scripture. For example, John 3:5 is often quoted as Jesus’ command to baptize.²

Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5.)

Over the years those theologians who have been influential in the development of church doctrine have used John 3:5 as a command to baptize, interpreting “born of water” as the practice of baptism. When the verse is taken by itself, such a conclusion can be made. However, if the context of the verse is taken into account, a different message arises. This statement was Jesus’ answer to Nicodemus’ question, “How can a man be born when he is old” (John 3:4). If the remainder of Jesus’ answer is considered,

Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:6-8.)

No inference to baptism is made here at all. Jesus is clearly talking about Nicodemus’ need to be born of the Spirit, as he has already been born of the flesh, or born of water. The necessity of birth that Jesus speaks of is the necessity of being born in the Spirit. Yet, by consideration of John 3:5 itself, the church necessitates being born of the water, baptism, as the inferred command here. This is quite the opposite of what Jesus was teaching. As obvious as this may appear, a large part of Christendom will still defend John 3:5 as the command to baptize,³ rejecting this argument through a variety of well researched rationalizations.

Going a step further, this command for baptism has been interpreted as a necessary step towards salvation. That is, as a sacrament, baptism is necessary for salvation, and without benefit of this act, the believer or non-believer is doomed to an eternity separated from God. This argument has been derived from an interpretation of the English translation of Mark 16:16.

Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:16).

If one looks at the first clause of this text, we see a logical “AND” construct which would, if taken literally, clearly limit salvation to those who believe and have been baptized. Such a logical conclusion, however, must be ignorant of the second clause of this

statement which does not include this logical property. Condemnation is described as an indictment against those who do not believe. No reference to baptism is noted here. Certainly, in the law-books of the 20th century, such an “oversight” would never be made. However, the ancient writers of scripture were not held to the logical or semantic scrutiny of the American Bar Association and our modern, technical society, and to hold scripture to that level of textual examination is often not effective in determining the original intent of the authors.

Faced with a lack of desired clear, concise procedures, the church has developed its own dogma to fill in the perceived holes. The Christian church has divided itself into denominations that adhere to their own set of interpretations. Over the years confessions and creeds have been written to clarify difficult theological issues. There are three distinct views that we can observe when it comes to the subject of baptism.

The Protestant Paedobaptist View.

“In baptism, the Christian is born. His old self is buried and the new self emerges. Whether in the case of infants or adults, baptism signifies this more as a promise than as an actually fulfilled fact. The direction is indicated rather than the arrival.” (Freidrich Rest)

The baptizing of infants is evident as soon as 150 years after Christ died. Gore states that there were “only two reasonable options. Either (a) the church, early on, introduced infant baptism against the practice of the apostolic church, or (b) the Church continued the apostolic practice of infant baptism.”⁴ One of the most influential of the protestant confessions, the Westminster Confession, has been adopted and still used by

several protestant church groups, most markedly the Presbyterian church. This confession states, “Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ (Mark 16:15, 16; Acts 8:37, 38), but also the infants of one or both believing parents, are to be baptized (Gen 17:7, 9 with Gal 3:9, 14, and Col 2:11, 12, and Acts 2:38, 39, and Rom 4:11, 12; Matt 28:19; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15; 1 Cor 7:14).⁵ Furthermore, the confession develops this thought through a series of ancient “frequently asked questions.”

Question: To whom is Baptism to be administered?

Answer: Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible Church, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him; but the infants of such as are members of the visible church, are to be baptized.⁶

Question: Unto whom is Baptism to be administered?

Answer: Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, and so strangers from the covenant of promise, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him, but infants descending from parents, either both, or but one of them, professing faith in Christ, and obedience to him, are in that respect within the covenant, and to be baptized.⁷

Baptism is to be administered to the infant children of parents who believe. This paedobaptist viewpoint is held by most of the truly historical Protestant groups including Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Reformed churches. It is rejected by several non-Protestant groups such as Baptists, Assemblies of God, and several Pentecostal groups. The paedobaptist view bases its defense primarily on three points: (1) Infants were circumcised in the Old Testament. (2) Baptism is parallel to circumcision,

and (3) the New Testament records instances of household baptisms. (Acts 16:15, 16:33, 1 Cor. 1:16.) However, there is no specific reference to the inclusion of an infant in any New Testament baptism. Consequently, these defenses of paedobaptism require an amount of inference. For example, the Lutheran Catechism states that “Christ has commanded to ‘**make disciples**’ of all nations (including children) by baptizing and teaching them. (Matt 28:19). Christ promises the kingdom of God to the children (Mark 10:14-16, and Baptism is the entrance to God’s kingdom. John 3:5.”⁸ “At baptism the Sponsors confess the Faith and make the Baptismal Vow in the name of the child”⁹

One might note that when speaking of the circumcision of the Old Testament, Paul writes that those who require circumcision are teaching a “different gospel,” (Gal. 3:10). Furthermore, there is no indication in any of these household conversions that the families that were brought to saving faith had any children who were too young to believe. These paedobaptists do not teach that baptism is a sacrament. They agree with the reformation view that salvation is by faith alone. Consequently, they find themselves in a middle ground between the Catholic view of baptism as a saving act, and the Baptist view of baptism as a testimony of faith. One might ask of those who hold to this latter paedobaptist view, “What is the purpose of baptism?” It holds neither the act of salvation, or serves as a testimony.

An interesting, though arguable, rationalization for infant baptism equates Jesus’ gracious acceptance of children stating, “of such is the kingdom of heaven,” with the gracious acceptance of adults. “Such words must mean a close connection of children with the kingdom of God. Such condition must men their right to a close relation with the

church... The privilege of such relationship must mean the right to Christian baptism.”¹⁰ A similar logical position is taken in the Methodist Discipline: “We hold that all children, by virtue of the unconditional benefits of the atonement, are members of the kingdom of God, and therefore graciously entitled to Baptism.”¹¹ I would refute these logical arguments on the grounds that Jesus’ statement of the children, “Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein,” was referring to their expressed unquestioning faith, that type of faith that should be found in the heart of every believer, child or adult.

A more convincing argument for infant baptism is drawn from scriptural defenses. Millard J. Erickson uses the several references to household baptisms (Acts 10:48, 11:14, 16:15, 16:31-34, 18:8) as evidence of infant baptism and “that children were baptized in the New Testament is precedent for the practice today.”¹² One could just as effectively argue that there is no explicit evidence that (1) these households contained infants, or (2) that such infants were considered part of the described household. Ancient culture varied greatly on the level of respect and recognition given to women and small children. To base a practice on such inferences may not be the best argument to use in their defense.

There are two views that are significantly variant with this one that has been adopted by such a large component of the modern Christian church. The first we will observe is an apologetic for “believer’s baptism,” where only those who openly express faith in Christ are baptized, and then we will look at the Catholic argument that baptism is a sacrament of the church, necessary for salvation and administered to infants.

Believer's Baptism

One of the distinctives of most Baptist groups is their agreement that baptism is an ordinance, a testimony, that is intended only for those who have expressed faith in Jesus Christ.

“Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer’s faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Savior, the believer’s death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead. Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and the Lord’s Supper.”¹³

Baptism is a testimony of expressed faith in Christ. The New Testament examples of those who were baptized suggest that baptism was administered only to those who gave a testimony to their faith. After Peter’s sermon at Pentecost, “those who received his word were baptised” (Acts 2:41) The text specifies that baptism was administered to those who “received his word” and therefore trusted in Christ for salvation.”¹⁴ “When Peter preached to the Gentiles in Cornelius’ household, he allowed baptism for those who had heard the word and received the holy spirit.” (Acts 10:44 - 36) There is no indication that any infants were included in this event.

Baptisms always followed saving faith. “There is a second consideration that argues for believer’s baptism: the outward symbol of beginning the Christian life should only be given to those who show evidence of having begun the Christian life.” (Grundem, P. 970.)¹⁵ The News Testament authors described the administration of baptism for those

who had personally trusted in Christ and experienced salvation. For example, (Gal 3:27). “Baptism without antecedent faith was treated as invalid in certain disciples at Ephesus.”¹⁶ See Acts 19:1-5.

The Roman Catholic view.

Baptism is a saving act for all persons. The Roman Catholic church teaches a salvation that is based upon the rite of Catholic Baptism rather than basing it on faith alone. This denomination holds that baptism is a necessary means for salvation and should be administered to all people, without regard to their spiritual state, and because of its necessity for salvation, should particularly be administered to infants in order to save them at the first opportunity. “Faith, as it is not the effective cause of justification ... need not be present. The faith which infants lack is ... replaced by the faith of the church.”¹⁷ The tradition of the Roman Catholic church goes so far as to hold that baptism replaces the faith of the person with the faith of the church so that no depth of spiritual apostasy will separate one from salvation who has been baptized. “Even if it be unworthily received, valid baptism imprints on the soul of the recipient an indelible spiritual mark, the Baptismal Character ... Every validly baptized person, even one baptized outside the Catholic church, becomes a member of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.”¹⁸

Consequently, without baptism a child cannot be saved from the penalty of sin, without regard to their statement of faith as they mature, or the faith of their parents. This doctrine created a conflict in the church regarding the state of babies that died prior to or during childbirth or shortly thereafter. To answer this conflict the ecumenical councils of

Lyons and Florence and the canons of the Council of Trent declare a special eternal state, the “*Limbus Infantum*,” that is assigned to these infants. It is a state of separation from God that is free from the pain and torture of that reserved for adults. Loraine Boettner expresses an interesting rationalization for this Roman Catholic dogma:

“The primary purpose of the church of Rome in excluding unbaptized infants from heaven is to force parents to commit their children to her as soon as possible. The long range design is to bring all people into subjection to her, to put her stamp of ownership on every person possible. And the pressure put on Roman Catholic parents to see to it that their children are baptized early is almost unbelievable - a commitment which once she receives she never relinquishes.”¹⁹

The primary purpose for infant baptism in both the paedobaptist and Catholic views lies in a desire to protect infants. If baptism is a sacrament that places the faith of the church on the individual, then the age of the individual, or their professed faith, is irrelevant. Consequently it would be advantageous to the individual to baptize as early as possible to avoid the possibility of death prior to the sacrament.

When paedobaptists present an infant for baptism, it does not carry the saving sacrament implied by the Catholic church, and often serves more as a dedication ceremony that is centered around the faith of the parents or the faith of the church and the commitment they are making to the child to rear him/her in “the admonition of the Lord.” Many churches who profess a view of “Believer’s Baptism,” most significantly Baptist churches, often deal with this issue of infant involvement by an either informal or formal act of infant dedication. Believing parents will present their infants to the church as a

testimony of their intent to dedicate their children to the Lord, and as a commitment to raise them under the authority of the Lord.

Summary.

We have looked at three quite disparate views concerning the subject of baptism. It would seem that if any one is the correct view, the others are false. However, not all matters of Christian practice are necessarily subject to a narrow and dogmatic definition. When we declare our own religious practices to be the only true ones we are setting ourselves up for errors including pride, exclusion of the Christian family, spiritual arrogance and others.

Together, all three views are promoted by attempts to be obedient to Jesus' command to baptize. As adherents to any one view, we must recognize that when we are sincerely honoring God by what we do, and our actions are not in conflict with the basic tenets of faith, we are not in a position to be judged by one another. If this is understood within the context of the agape love inspired by the Holy Spirit, we can be tolerant of one another's views, recognizing them all to be a viable administration of God's grace as we seek to further his Kingdom on earth. It is when we step outside of the basis of God's agape love, and develop exclusive religious practices that become barriers to acceptance of one another we are skating on ever thinning ice. For example, those holding to believer's baptism might view paedobaptism in the same way the early church saw the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. Some Christians saw the meat as meaningless and harmless, feeling no need to treat it any differently than any other. Some other Christians drew great meaning

from the meat, identifying it with the false idols it was to be sacrificed for, and viewing its consumption by Christians with disgust. As Paul addresses this in Romans 14:10-14, we can be reminded to love each other without regard of our preferred religious practices, and when we see each other in that love of God, the importance of these other matters vanishes.

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