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BELIEVERS' BAPTISM VIEW

Bruce A. Ware

THE CLOSING WORDS OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW present some of the most important instructions of the Lord Christ to his redeemed people: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:18-20).¹ Despite the obvious significance of this dominical commissioning, followers of Christ have entertained both differing understandings and differing practices, particularly of Christ’s command to baptize others. One would have hoped that Christ’s church would uniformly understand and follow just what Christ instructed. Yet the sad fact is that our different views of baptism mean that in all likelihood significant portions of Christ’s church are failing to carry out what Christ has commanded, even if this failure stems from good motives.

In this chapter a case will be made for understanding Christ’s words to mean that those who have *believed* in Jesus Christ should be *immersed* in water in obedience to Christ’s command.² That is,

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

²For a sustained argument that baptism is only rightly of disciples, see Fred A. Malone,

Christ's imperative here is that only those, but all of those, who have become believers in Christ should be baptized following their conversion to Christ (also referred to as credobaptism) and that their baptism should take place through their immersion in water. The subjects of baptism, then, are believers in Christ and his atoning work. The mode of their baptism is by immersion.

If the argument of this chapter is correct, then it simply is the case that large portions of the church are living in disobedience to Christ, despite the fact that they would deny this is the case and even attempt to defend their own practice of baptizing infants on biblical grounds (also referred to as paedobaptism).³ While we agree to disagree as brothers and sisters in Christ, our disagreement here must be seen by all followers of Christ as sobering, since we cannot but conclude that obedience to our Lord is at stake in our understanding and practice of the baptism he commanded his followers to practice.

In what follows, I will present a summary of the positive case for believers' baptism by immersion,⁴ appealing to biblical, theological and historical support. In the process, reference will be made at various points to other Christian traditions, particularly to the Reformed paedobaptist tradition. While contrasts will be noted with that and other traditions, the main burden of this portion of the chapter is a

The Baptism of Disciples Alone: A Covenantal Argument for Credobaptism Versus Paedobaptism (Cape Coral, Fla.: Founders Press, 2003).

³Some of the most thorough defenses of paedobaptism are the following: Pierre-Charles Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism: Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace*, trans. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (London: James Clarke & Co., 1959); Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Children of Promise: The Case for Baptizing Infants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 1980); Robert R. Booth, *Children of the Promise: The Biblical Case for Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 1995); Douglas Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations—Infant Baptism: Covenant Mercy for the People of God* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1996); and Gregg Strawbridge, ed., *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 2003).

⁴For fuller treatments, I recommend that the reader consult George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962); Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); Malone, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone*; and especially Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, eds., *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, New American Commentary Studies in Bible & Theology 2 (Nashville: B & H, 2007).

presentation of the positive case for the credobaptist position. Following this summary, two brief commendations will be offered for the practical benefits of believers' baptism.

BIBLICAL SUPPORT FOR BELIEVERS' BAPTISM BY IMMERSION

Linguistic argument. First, the term *baptism* refers most clearly and naturally to the immersion of a person in water, and as such, its very usage argues directly for immersion as the mode of baptism, and indirectly for the application of baptism to those past infancy. The root meaning of the word *baptō* is “to dip,” “to submerge,” “to immerse,”⁵ or more explicitly, “to dip in or under.”⁶ The usages of *baptō* in classical Greek, in the LXX (e.g., 2 Kings 5:14), and in the New Testament all evidence this prevailing meaning. When washing or sprinkling are in view, the more common words used are *louō*, *nipō* or *rhainō*.⁷ In the New Testament in particular, *baptō* is used only four times, “and only with the meaning of ‘dip.’”⁸ *Baptizō* occurs chiefly in the Gospels for John’s baptism, in the form of immersion, and in the rest of the New Testament for Christian baptism. Oepke notes that the intensified form, *baptizō*, is used in the sense of “immerse” from the time of Hippocrates forward in such contexts, for example, of the sinking of a ship in water or of one who drowns in water.⁹ Clearly the biblical terms for “baptism” have the prevailing meaning associated with immersion.¹⁰

Contextual argument. The contextual usage of these terms in the

⁵G. R. Beasley-Murray, “Baptism,” *NIDNTT* 1:144.

⁶Albrecht Oepke, “*baptō*, *baptizō*,” *TDNT* 1:529.

⁷G. R. Beasley-Murray, “Baptism,” *NIDNTT* 1:144.

⁸*Ibid.*, 1:145.

⁹Oepke, “*baptō*, *baptizō*,” 1:530.

¹⁰One cannot help but wonder how the church’s grappling with the issue of baptism might have been altered had the translators of our earliest English Bibles actually translated *baptō* and *baptizō* instead of transliterating the term. If we had read in our English Bibles that Jesus was “immersed” in the Jordan by John the Baptist, or that Jesus commanded his followers to make disciples, “immersing” them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit—one cannot help wonder how differently the thinking of Christian people may have been.

New Testament supports this simple linguistic argument. For example, following Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, we see Jesus described as coming "up from the water" (Mt 3:16) or "up out of the water" (Mk 1:10). It is noteworthy that a very careful Roman Catholic scholar, John Meier, argues that John the Baptist practiced immersion.

That John's baptism involved immersion of the candidates' body is implied by the statement that, after Jesus' baptism, he "came up out of the water" (Mark 1:10 || Matt 3:16). This supposition is bolstered (1) by the Baptist's focus on the Jordan River and on Aenon-near-Salim, in which he baptized "because there was an abundance of water there" (John 3:23); and (2) by Josephus' statements in the *Antiquities* that John baptized not to cleanse souls but to purify bodies.¹¹

Similarly in the account of Philip baptizing the eunuch from Ethiopia, we read that Philip and the eunuch "both went down into the water" (Acts 8:38), and then both "came up out of the water" (Acts 8:39). Similar accounts can be found in some early church documents closest in time to the New Testament period itself. *The Shepherd* of Hermas (ca. A.D. 140-155), for example, speaks of some who believed the preaching of the gospel as having descended "into the water, and again ascended."¹² Stander and Louw comment, "Obviously the phrases 'going down' and 'coming up' are used to focus on the two processes involved in immersion."¹³ Clearly the evidence from such accounts favors strongly the notion that baptism was by immersion.

¹¹John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 2, *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p. 93 n. 152.

¹²Hermas *Shepherd*, Similitude 9.16; as quoted in Hendrick Stander and Johannes Louw, *Baptism in the Early Church*, rev. ed. (Webster, N.Y.: Cary Publications, 2005), p. 20. Note: my thanks are extended to Professor Michael Haykin for making me aware of this very helpful historical resource.

¹³Stander and Louw, *Baptism in the Early Church*, p. 20. Stander and Louw, *Baptism in the Early Church*, p. 25, argue similarly for understanding the prevailing practice of the early church to be that of immersion from several other citations of various church fathers and documents, included among them Aristides of Athens, Clement of Alexandria (p. 31), Tertullian (pp. 36-37), Hippolytus (p. 42) and Basil the Great (who practiced tri-immersion, p. 82).

All of the evidence taken together makes a compelling case for understanding the mode of baptism in the New Testament as done by immersion. While this argument relates directly to the question of mode of baptism, it also favors indirectly the idea that the subjects of baptism were not infants.¹⁴ We simply do not see either in the New Testament or in the early church any clear practice of immersing infants.¹⁵ If it can be sustained that the mode of baptism in the New Testament is immersion, this clearly, then, lends support to the idea that those so immersed were well beyond their infancy. Even if “children” are baptized in the New Testament and in the early church, we certainly must distinguish “children” generally from “infants” specifically. The notion that infants were baptized by immersion simply has no support. That baptism was by immersion, then, fits best, to say the least, with the idea of the subjects of baptism being at least young children and older, while it certainly does not relate to infants.

Instruction and practice of baptism in the New Testament. Every New Testament instruction or command regarding baptism, and every clear instance of baptism that we see in the New Testament, relates to the baptism of those who have repented of sin (John’s baptism) and come to faith in Christ (baptisms from Pentecost forward). In other words the strongest support from New Testament evidence favors the position of believers’ baptism. Clearly the baptism of John the Baptist was a baptism for those who had repented of sin in anticipation of the Messiah’s coming (Mk 1:4-8). Such baptism, with the subjects confessing their sin and responding to John’s call for repentance (Mk 1:4-5), sim-

¹⁴I am aware that this argument would have less force for members of Greek Orthodox churches, which often practice infant immersion. Nonetheless the practice of infant immersion performed in Greek Orthodoxy still was not practiced either in the NT or in the early church.

¹⁵Stander and Louw, *Baptism in the Early Church*, pp. 29-33, comment that some early church texts might be interpreted as indicating the immersion of infants, but these interpretations can be shown to be far less likely than some others—for example, that the immersion was of “children” who were not infants per se or of those who were “children” in the faith. See, for example, their discussion of the baptism by immersion of “children” in Clement of Alexandria.

INFANT BAPTISM RESPONSE

Sinclair B. Ferguson

PROFESSOR BRUCE WARE HAS GIVEN a vigorous apologia for credobaptism, forcefully stating his conclusion: paedobaptists “are living in disobedience to Christ” (p. 20). It is impossible here to respond with exegetical detail to all the points Dr. Ware makes, but several comments may be made.

BAPTISM BY IMMERSION

Dr. Ware argues that “the term *baptism* refers most clearly and naturally to the immersion of a person in water.” Some noted paedobaptists have also held this view, not least John Calvin.¹ Four things, should however be noted:

1. The New Testament *accounts* of baptism neither indicate nor require immersion as the mode except when they are read through an a priori lens. Were baptism by affusion (pouring), it would not require the rewording of any of the relevant passages (e.g., Mt 3:16; Mk 1:10; Acts 8:38).

A similar comment can be made of the teaching of *Didache* 7:

Baptize “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” in running water. But if you have no running water, then baptize

¹John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.15.19.

in some other water; and if you are not able to baptize in cold water, then do so warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times, “in the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit.”²

The symbolism here is the washing away of sin. I suspect the *Didache* itself may have been misread at this point as though baptism in running water, other water, cold water, warm water, by pouring water on the head three times were *a series of alternative modes*. Rather they are *a series of different contexts*. The *only mode* mentioned is affusion.

2. New Testament *expositions* of baptism do not require immersion. These characteristically relate baptism to union with Christ in his death and resurrection. To imply that immersion alone represents this presupposes a Western concept of burial. Nor is our Lord’s death (being “lifted up” on the cross) particularly well symbolized in immersion, nor even the mode of his burial (in a tomb, not under the earth).

3. The *root* meaning of *baptō/baptizō* is not immersion as such. Most fundamentally it seems to express the idea of one thing being overwhelmed by another. Immersion may express this, but it has no exclusive claim to do so, as examples from classical literature indicate. Indeed in the New Testament rather than mean “immerse,” the verb *baptizein* means “baptize.”

4. In this context the New Testament features one highly significant baptism. The mode of the baptism that fulfills our Lord’s promise “you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5; cf. Mt 3:11 and parallels) was *pouring* (*ekcheō*, Acts 2:17, 33; used also of the Spirit in Rom. 5:5). It is therefore impossible exegetically to insist that baptism *means* to immerse. Indeed this fundamental baptism presents a case for affusion as the mode used in the early church (cf. *Didache* 7). After all, it is the outpouring of the Spirit that effects that union with Christ in his death and resurrection in which we are justified and sanctified.

²*Didache* 7.1-3 (AF, p. 259).

Dr. Ware believes the argument for *immersion* is simultaneously an argument *against the baptism of infants*: “as such, its very usage argues directly for immersion as the mode of baptism, and indirectly for the application of baptism to those past infancy” (p. 21).

This is special pleading. The first Christians were used to an initiation rite in which they watched (and some actually performed) the cutting off of the foreskin of their eight-day-old sons! Even if baptism were immersion, it is unlikely that such fathers would have qualms about a momentary submersion of their infants!

Furthermore Dr. Ware dismisses the Orthodox practice of baptism as virtually irrelevant (p. 23 n. 14). Yet it and other paedobaptist churches who practice immersion constitute a massive counter argument to his case. I confess a vested interest here. Were I to write “My wife was baptized as an infant,” a reader might conclude she could not have been immersed. Were I to write “My wife was baptized by immersion,” another reader might conclude she could not have been baptized as an infant. Both would be wrong. Yet another might assume she was Eastern Orthodox. But no. The use of the verb “baptize” disclosed nothing about the mode. The assumptions about the mode were in the minds of my hearers not in the meaning of the term. So also in the New Testament.

MEANING OF BAPTISM

Why do credobaptists and paedobaptists disagree on the subjects of baptism?

From one perspective paedobaptists appear to disagree *only in part* with credobaptists. One of the joys of being a paedobaptist is that we baptize those from outside of the church who have been drawn to a living faith in Christ. We too have our stories of such baptisms and their impact. The obverse is not the case. Dr. Ware’s doctrine allows neither the baptism of infants nor, presumably, their belonging (in any biblically explicable and theologically coherent sense) to the church as the family of God.

But why say that paedobaptists *appear* to disagree only in part?

INFANT BAPTISM VIEW

Sinclair B. Ferguson

“I’M FIRST A CHRISTIAN, NEXT A CATHOLIC, then a Calvinist, fourth a Paedobaptist and finally a Presbyterian. I cannot reverse the order” said John (“Rabbi”) Duncan, in one of his many Talmud-like aphorisms.¹ What follows is written with a similar sense of priorities. Paul’s statement “Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor 1:17)² expresses a mindset which prioritized gospel preaching over baptismal administration without thereby minimizing the important role of the latter.³

Nevertheless our understanding of the gospel inevitably comes to expression in our theology and practice of baptism. Consequently these do sometimes reflect very different perspectives on how the gospel is understood and proclaimed and on what its implications are for biblical hermeneutics and church and family life. Baptism is, after all, an ordinance *of the gospel*. Its theology and practice can never be

¹William Knight, *Colloquia Peripatetica*, 5th ed. (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1879), p. 8. The wise and eccentric Duncan (1796-1870) was professor of Hebrew in New College, Edinburgh.

²All Scripture quotations unless otherwise indicated are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

³Five letters in the Pauline corpus contain explicit reference to various facets of baptism (Rom 6:1-11; 1 Cor 1:13-17; Gal 3:27; Eph 4:5; Col 2:11-12). Many scholars detect additional allusions in his letters.

divorced from our understanding of its evangelical matrix.

The discussion of different baptismal theologies labors under the immediate difficulty of the misleading nomenclature of baptist and paedobaptist (or infant baptist). In fact we are all baptists. Furthermore paedobaptists baptize *believers* and their children, including infants (*infantes*, literally those who do not speak).⁴ Indeed with the collapse of Christendom we baptize believers today probably more frequently than at any time since the Reformation. This is as it always should have been in the church as God's evangelistic agent in the world. It would have been so were it not for the disastrous combination of belief in baptismal regeneration and the Constantinian church-state settlement which led to indiscriminate infant baptism.

On whatever side of the dividing waters of baptism one stands, difficult and as yet impenetrable historical-theological questions arise. Among them are the following:

- If the apostolic churches practiced infant baptism, why are we not able to trace easily in postapostolic literature an unbroken and unquestioned testimony to it from the time of the apostles to the third century?
- If, however, only believers' baptism was practiced in the New Testament church, how is it that infant baptism arose without apparent record of serious theological protest before Tertullian (ca. A.D. 200)?
- Is it in any case wise for evangelicals to appeal to the baptismal *practice* enshrined in the documents of the postapostolic church if, by and large, they are distinctly uncomfortable with the baptismal *doctrine* of the church fathers?

In what follows we will briefly set the scene by tracing the evidence for infant baptism in the postapostolic church (the historical perspective), thereafter provide a biblical-theological perspective on baptism as a whole (the redemptive-historical perspective), before

⁴It might be nearer the mark to speak of covenantal-family-baptists and credobaptists in order to stress that different theological *grounds* for baptism are in view, since every year I baptize numbers of believers on profession of faith.

drawing some conclusions about the baptism of the infants of believers (the ecclesiastical perspective).

BAPTISM IN THE POSTAPOSTOLIC CHURCH

The witness of early church history to the practice of baptism is frustratingly patchy. Evidence comes essentially from three extant sources. Moving backward in time through them provides us with a snapshot album of baptismal practice in the first three centuries of the church's existence.

Records of mortality. The death inscriptions of early Christianity breathe a remarkable spirit of hope in a world of pagan hopelessness. Some, dating back to the turn of the third century, chronicle early mortality and provide testimony to the faith—and the sadnesses—of Christians.⁵ Numbers of mortally ill children were baptized and thus (in the language of the inscriptions) were “made believers” or “obtained the grace of the glorious font.” In some cases baptism preceded death by only a matter of hours. Infants were among those who received “clinical” baptism in this way. These infants and children had not already been baptized. This might seem to be proof negative against the idea that the early church already practiced infant baptism. Professor Everett Ferguson has suggested that these death inscriptions give a substantial hint that widespread infant baptism actually grew out of the practice of clinical baptism. However, this strand of evidence belongs to the period when baptism was already being postponed through fear of the risk of postbaptismal sin. It is doubtful if any concrete, rather than speculative, conclusions can be drawn from it.

⁵See the discussions and contrasting conclusions in Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (London: SCM Press, 1960); idem, *The Origins of Infant Baptism* (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1963); and Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963). See also Everett Ferguson, “Inscriptions and the Origin of Infant Baptism,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 30 (1979): 37–46; idem, *Early Christians Speak* (Abilene, Tex.: Abilene Christian University Press, 1987), pp. 55–65. Unfortunately Professor Ferguson's *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) appeared only as these pages were going to press.

Works of theology. The church's transition to the postponement of baptism stands in marked contrast to apostolic example (e.g., Acts 2:41; 8:34-39; 9:18; 10:48; 16:33), but is detailed in postapostolic teaching. Thus Tertullian (ca. 160/70-215/20), in his *De Baptismo*, argues that baptism should be delayed lest it be received without a serious appreciation of its meaning.⁶ This reaction—in his case set within the context of perceived laxity in the church—would eventually drive him into the arms of the Montanist sect. But his arguments indicate that already by his time the practice of infant baptism was widespread, even if they do not by themselves indicate how long that had been the case.

Statements prior to this are consistent with infant baptism and fit well with its practice, but fall short of proof. Into this category fit the well-known words of Polycarp at the time of his martyrdom (155/160) detailing 86 years of Christian life.⁷ Irenaeus (fl. 175-195) speaks of infants being “born again” to God, in a context in which “regeneration” and baptism appear to coalesce in his thinking.⁸ Certainly Origen (ca. 185-ca. 254) believed that the church had received the tradition of infant baptism from the apostles.⁹ In contrast to Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage (ca. 200/10-258) affirms that baptism should be administered as early in life and as soon as possible.¹⁰

⁶Tertullian argues that both the baptized person and his or her sponsors (in the case of an infant) may lapse and thus be placed in a perilous condition in view of, e.g., Heb 6:4-6: “If any understand the weighty import of baptism, they will fear its reception more than its delay.” Hence he affirms, “the delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children.” *On Baptism* 18 (ANF 3:678). Cf. also Tertullian *On Repentance* 7 (ANF 3:663). His *Against Marcion* 1.28.2 (ANF 3:293) contains probably his clearest statement on the effects of baptism.

⁷“For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” The words are, however, inconclusive with respect to the actual timing of his baptism (*The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9 [AF, p. 139]).

⁸*Against Heresies* 2.22.4. His language elsewhere underlines the intimacy of the connection, cf. 3.17.1.

⁹*Commentary on Roman* 5.9.11 (FC 103, p. 367). “It is on this account as well that the Church has received the tradition from the apostles to give baptism even to little children.” The context (Origen has cited Ps 51:5) implies a reference here to *infant* children.

¹⁰In a letter to Fidus. *The Epistles of Cyprian* 58 (ANF 5:353-54).

Prior to this point the extant evidence in, for example, *The Epistles of Ignatius* (ca. 100), *The Epistle of Barnabas* (ca. 70–130) and *The Shepherd of Hermas* (ca. 150) remains silent. No certain answers to the historical questions delineated above are provided.

Evidence from liturgy. The practice of infant baptism is confirmed by the *Apostolic Tradition*.¹¹ Like similarly named pieces (e.g., The Apostles' Creed), this is *postapostolic* in origin and was probably compiled by Hippolytus of Rome (d. ca. A.D. 236). It details a three-year preparatory class required for new communicants and describes their subsequent baptism. Noteworthy are several elements in the extended liturgy. One is the observation that martyrdom serves as baptism in one's own blood.¹² Others include the extrabiblical practice of the prebaptismal all-night vigil, exorcism, sufflation, the laying on of hands and anointing.¹³

Candidates for baptism were received in a fixed order: first, children, then men and finally women (possibly because all were baptized after the removal of clothing). For our purposes the liturgy for the children is especially interesting: "And first the little children are to be baptized; and if he is able to speak for himself, he is to speak [i.e., make the confession of faith in accordance with the Creed of the church in Rome—an early form of the Apostles' Creed]; and if they are not able, their parents are to speak on their behalf or one of their relatives." The confession was made in connection with the trinitarian structure of the creed, and in that connection triune baptism was administered.¹⁴

The controversial Hippolytus certainly regarded himself as a conservator. There is no adequate reason to doubt that he is detailing an already well-developed tradition in the church of Rome (and elsewhere) by the end of the second century A.D. Several features are noteworthy:

¹¹See Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, ed. H. W. Attridge, Hermenein (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 102–3.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 104–7.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 112–17.

INFANT BAPTISM VIEW

BELIEVERS' BAPTISM RESPONSE

Bruce A. Ware

I AM GRATEFUL FOR THE SUPERB CHAPTER provided by Sinclair Ferguson defending infant baptism. It stands as one of the finest and most able defenses I have read. I believe that it helps demonstrate how some, indeed many, find this view compelling. Alas, I am not among those so compelled. In what follows I shall offer only the responses I believe most important, trusting that the reader will study in addition my own chapter in which I have interacted throughout with various aspects of the paedobaptist position.

First, the historical argument presented by Ferguson seems to me much more optimistic in its support of an early established paedobaptist practice than I believe the historical data warrant. Of course all sides recognize that the paucity of relevant information makes any and all conclusions necessarily tentative. Nevertheless it appears likely from recent historic study that an earlier paedobaptist historiography was overly inclined to find infant baptism where there was none—or at least where none was clearly to be found. As some recent historical studies have pointed out, mention of the baptism of children has sometimes been taken as evidence for the baptism of infants, where this simply cannot be demonstrated. While all sides agree that the historical argument is secondary and that what Scripture teaches is primary, nonetheless, it seems most probable that the

picture from early church practice of the first several centuries favors believers' baptism, with infant baptism increasing along with stronger desires to secure the salvation of those who die in infancy.

Second, Ferguson's understanding of baptism as sign and seal at one level can be accepted and applauded by Baptists as exactly right. In answering the question, "What does baptism signify and seal?" he writes, "Baptism is a sign and seal of the union with Christ and fellowship with the Father given by the Spirit and received by us through faith" (p. 89). Amen and amen!

The fact that paedobaptists speak with such clarity about baptism's connection to union with Christ and the indwelling of the Spirit by faith has led more than one reader of the paedobaptist argument to wonder just how infants qualify. By nature, infants cannot yet have believed and so are neither united with Christ nor indwelt with the Spirit. Of course, then, the paedobaptist argument depends on seeing baptism as sign and seal of the new covenant in a fashion parallel to circumcision as sign and seal of the old.

I will not repeat in full here the argument against this understanding I have made in my own chapter. Suffice it to say that this is exactly where the main theological difference between credobaptists and paedobaptists occurs. Whether the move from circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant with Abraham extends forward with fundamental continuity or with some significant discontinuity to the sign and seal of baptism for the new covenant—here is where the main theological difference is most sharply seen. As I endeavored to explain, the fact that circumcision functioned at two levels, both for the ethnic and national people of Israel and for the spiritual reality of being separated unto God, indicates that the sign and seal of baptism simply is not meant to be seen as parallel to circumcision. Rather than being one nation, the community of the new covenant is composed of believers in Christ from every people, tribe and nation. The function of national identity drops out in the new covenant. In its place is the multiethnic, multinational church of Jesus Christ. As such baptism functions only in relation to the spiritual

reality and not in relation to the ethnic and national reality as circumcision previously had.

When Ferguson writes that “with respect to their distinctive covenants and epochs both baptism and circumcision share the same core symbolism” p. 87, it becomes clear that he fails to appreciate fully the role that circumcision played in marking off a particular ethnic and national people as those separated unto Yahweh, chosen as a distinctive people from all other nations and peoples on the face of the earth (Deut 7:6-8). That Israel marked infant males by circumcision as part of this distinctive ethnic and national people of God was crucial to the identity of Israel as the nation she was, and as the people through whom the promised Messiah would come. His coming would bring salvation not only to Israel but through her to the other nations of the world. Precisely because in the new covenant both Jew and Gentile are united in “one new man” (Eph 2:15) where “circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing” (1 Cor 7:19 NRSV; cf. Gal 5:6), it simply is wrong to carry forward the function of circumcision as a marker of a distinctive ethnic, national people into the new reality of those, from any and every nation, who are united by faith to Christ.

That is not to deny any relation between circumcision and baptism. Where circumcision and baptism are parallel is exactly where Colossians 2:11-12 see them as parallel, namely, in the spiritual reality to which each of them points. When one ponders the question of the *nature* of the circumcision that *is* parallel to baptism, it is clear that it is spiritual, not physical, circumcision. Paul could not be clearer: “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision *made without hands* [i.e., *not* physical circumcision], by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ” (Col 2:11, emphasis added). The nature of this circumcision marks one off as spiritually united with Christ, having died to the flesh and now living to Christ. When Paul continues that those who were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands are those who have been “buried with him in baptism” (Col 2:12), it becomes clear that baptism par-

DUAL-PRACTICE BAPTISM VIEW

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MY TASK IN THIS CHAPTER IS CONSIDERABLY easier than that of my two colleagues, and not just because they have graciously allowed me the privilege of defending the correct view. I also have the advantage of occupying the middle position, which means that they will have argued at length for the validity of baptizing babies and for the value of deferring baptism, both of which I believe in. In this chapter we will begin with the process of becoming a Christian in the New Testament, go on to ask whether the apostolic church baptized babies and conclude with a discussion of some of the theological issues relating to the baptism of babies.

Please permit me first to begin with a word of personal testimony. I was born to nonchurchgoing parents. At the age of three I was baptized in an Anglican church, at my grandmother's urging. Apparently I cried out, "He's not going to pour that water over me!" For a time I thought of this as early evidence of theological discernment, but I now regard it as the folly of youth. The price that my mother had to pay for having me baptized was a promise to seek confirmation. This she did, and it turned us into churchgoers. Much later in life she moved beyond that into a living personal faith.

In due course I myself was converted and went on to study theol-

ogy. I gave little thought to infant baptism, though I saw no point in it. Then while using a commentary by two high-churchmen in my study of Romans chapter 6, it suddenly dawned on me that baptism made perfect sense if confined to believers. I discussed this with friends, who told me that the best defence of infant baptism was Pierre Marcel's *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism: The Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace*.¹ I read it eagerly but decided that the apparently logical argument was flawed by a number of unacknowledged gaps, so Marcel made a Baptist of me. For over thirty years I have belonged to baptistic churches, and my children were not baptized as babies.

At a later stage I read George Beasley-Murray's *Baptism in the New Testament*.² This Baptist author persuaded me that New Testament baptism was not so much believers' baptism as converts' baptism. Thinking about this made me realize that Baptist and paedobaptist practice are alike modifications of this. At the same time I was concerned about the fact that my children appeared to be believers but were not yet baptized, a situation that I could not square with the New Testament. The suggestion that such children should take communion until they were old enough for baptism struck me as hopelessly confused. So Beasley-Murray (with help) moved me away from the Baptist position.

The purpose of this narrative is not just to demonstrate that I am a cussed individual who always reacts against things but also to show that the position argued in this essay comes from having lived and thought within the two opposing positions and having myself found both of them to be wanting.

CHRISTIAN INITIATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

How does one become a Christian? Our discussion of baptism must begin with this fundamental question. What must I do to be saved?

¹Pierre Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism: The Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace* (London: James Clarke, 1953).

²George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962).

What needs to happen when someone wishes to respond to the gospel? Or to use the jargon, what is Christian initiation? One way to answer this question is to look at the Acts of the Apostles, where we see the apostles preaching the gospel to unbelievers. In particular fourteen passages narrate how evangelists tell enquirers how to respond or provide a reasonably full account of the conversion of a person or group.³

If we look at these passages and ask what was expected to happen, we find four things that repeatedly occur: repentance, faith, baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit. All four are not mentioned every time, but a clear fourfold pattern emerges.⁴ Faith is mentioned ten times and is found in a variant reading in an eleventh passage (Acts 8:37). Apart from Peter's address in Acts 3 (which the police interrupted), the only place where faith is missing is in two accounts of Paul's conversion (Acts 9:17-18; 22:14-16), though it may safely be assumed that his conversion did involve faith.⁵ Baptism is also mentioned ten times, the exceptions including the incomplete sermon of Acts 3. The other omissions are Acts 15:7-9, referring to the conversion of Cornelius who was in fact baptized (Acts 10:47-48), the sermon on Mars Hill (Acts 17:30-34) and Paul's account of his own teaching in Acts 20:20-21.

That all four things are not mentioned every time shows that Luke was not a pedant, not that all four things did not happen each time. This can be seen from multiple accounts of the same event (conversions of Paul and Cornelius) where different things are mentioned each time. When the apostles suspected that one of these was missing, they took care to remedy the defect (Acts 8:15-17, 20-23; 19:1-7).

³Acts 2:37-41; 3:17-21; 8:12-17, 36-39; 9:17-18; 10:43-48; 11:15-18; 15:7-9; 16:14-15, 30-34; 17:30-34; 19:1-7; 20:20-21; 22:14-16.

⁴James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1970), p. 91, sees three elements in Christian initiation: repentance, baptism and the gift of the Spirit. He then states that repentance and faith are "opposite sides of the same coin." It makes more sense to speak of four elements, as does David Pawson, *The Normal Christian Birth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), pp. 9-90.

⁵In Acts 26:15-18 Paul is instructed at his conversion to preach sanctification by faith.

This picture coheres with what we see in the rest of the New Testament, where faith and baptism are like the clichéd two sides of a coin. Baptism is a part of Christian initiation by which people become Christians, but this is not baptism without faith. Baptism is also part of the gospel message. In the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 baptism is commanded, but faith is not even mentioned! For the New Testament writers *faith* means “faith confessed in baptism” and *baptism* means “baptism as a confession of faith.” They thought of faith and baptism as a unity, not just on theoretical grounds but because in actual practice they came together. It was easy therefore for them to glide unselfconsciously from talking about the one to talking about the other. A few examples will suffice:

In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. (Gal 3:26-27 ESV)

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:11-12 NIV)

Perhaps the most striking example lies in the very structure of Romans. In Romans 1—5 Paul develops his doctrine of justification by faith. In Romans 6 he unselfconsciously turns to a discussion of baptism. Has he completely changed the subject? No. The faith that justifies is the faith that gave birth to baptism at conversion. The baptism by which they were buried with Christ is the baptism with which they expressed their faith at their conversion. A single reality is being discussed from two different angles, as is seen from the blending of faith and confession of Christ (in baptism) in Romans 10:9-10.

New Testament converts' baptism and infant baptism. Do we need to continue? Surely it is abundantly clear that the practice of the apostles as recorded in Acts was believers' baptism, the baptism of those

who had come to faith and repentance, the position taken by Baptists today. So it is commonly understood, but this is not quite true. What we see in Acts is not *believers'* baptism but *converts'* baptism.⁶ People are baptized at the point of their conversion.

Baptism is clearly seen as part of the initial response to the gospel in Acts. Baptism was an essential part of Christian initiation. People were baptized immediately on their conversion, on the very same day, with only one exception. The exception is the Philippian jailer, who was baptized the same night! Baptism was not optional. It was not left to the conscience of the individual believer. It was not delayed until the convert's genuineness was proved. Instead it was part of the gospel message. So in his epistles Paul can assume that his readers have all been baptized (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 4:4-6).

If apostolic baptism was converts' baptism, does that not exclude the baptism of babies? Not necessarily. People were baptized at the point of their conversion. But what happened to their children? What happened to the existing babies and children of those earliest converts? In particular were they baptized with their parents? What happened to the children subsequently born to them? How were they initiated? Were they baptized at birth or at some subsequent stage? Unfortunately neither Luke nor any other New Testament writer gives an unequivocal, explicit answer to this question. Whatever did happen to these children, of one thing we can be certain. They did not receive the converts' baptism described in Acts. Whether they were baptized that day or at the age of five, twelve or eighteen, their baptism was an adaptation of adult converts' baptism to the changed situation of those brought up in a Christian home. The New Testament practice and doctrine of baptism is that of converts' baptism, and *however* the children of those converts were treated would be a modification of that.

Scholars have sometimes suggested that this did not become an issue until the second generation of the church, but that is far from

⁶As is shown by Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, e.g., pp. 393-94.

the truth. The New Testament church was not a student Christian Union of youngsters who had yet to settle down and have families. The three thousand converts on the day of Pentecost must have had many children of every age. Whether or not to baptize was an issue that had to be decided *that day*. How was it decided?

DID THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH BAPTIZE BABIES?

A seismological approach. Traditionally this question has been answered by considering all of the evidence available from New Testament times, which is notoriously ambiguous. I have suggested an alternative “seismological” approach.⁷ Without leaving their own laboratories, seismologists in New York can observe and measure earthquakes that take place in Los Angeles. How do they do this? They can tell what has happened in California by its effects two to three thousand miles away. In a similar manner I would suggest that we can deduce what was the situation in apostolic times by its effects two to three hundred years later.

The beginning of infant baptism. When did infant baptism, the baptism of those too young to speak for themselves, begin? This historical question was argued at some length (but inconclusively) in a famous exchange between two German scholars, Joachim Jeremias, who defended the apostolic origin of infant baptism, and Kurt Aland, who denied it.⁸ The evidence before the end of the second century is so meager and ambiguous that it is widely accepted that a firm verdict is not possible. It may be helpful therefore, in seeking to answer the question, to work backward using our seismological approach: that is, to start from a time in church history where it is clear what happened and to work back from that point to New Testament times.

⁷A. N. S. Lane, “Did the Apostolic Church Baptise Babies? A Seismological Approach,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 55, no. 1 (2004): 109-30. This section is an abbreviation of that article.

⁸Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (London: SCM Press, 1960); Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* (London: SCM Press, 1963); Joachim Jeremias, *The Origins of Infant Baptism* (London: SCM Press, 1963). Kurt Aland, *Die Stellung der Kinder in den frühen christlichen Gemeinden—und ihre Taufe* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1967), has not been translated.