

*Systematic Theology,*  
*an Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*  
by Wayne Grudem  
(Chapter 49)

**Note:** The abbreviation *cf.* derives from the Latin word *confer*, while in English it is commonly read as "compare". The abbreviation advises readers to consult other material, usually for the purpose of drawing a contrast.

# BAPTISM

## ***Who should be baptized? How should it be done? What does it mean?***

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### EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

In this chapter and the next we treat baptism and the Lord's Supper, two ceremonies that Jesus commanded his church to perform. But before we begin consideration of either one of them we must note that there is disagreement among Protestants even over the general term that should be applied to them. Because the Roman Catholic Church calls these two ceremonies "sacraments," and because the Catholic Church teaches that these sacraments *in themselves* actually *convey grace* to people (without requiring faith from the person participating in them), some Protestants (especially Baptists) have refused to refer to baptism and the Lord's Supper as "sacraments." They have preferred the word *ordinances* instead. This is thought to be an appropriate term because baptism and the Lord's Supper were "ordained" by Christ.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, other Protestants such as those in the Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed traditions, have been willing to use the word "sacraments" to refer to baptism and the Lord's Supper, without thereby endorsing the Roman Catholic position.

It does not seem that any significant point is at issue here in the questions of whether to call baptism and the Lord's Supper "ordinances" or "sacraments." Since Protestants who use both words explain clearly what they mean by them, the argument is not really over doctrine but over the meaning of an English word. If we are willing to explain clearly what we mean, it does not seem to make any difference whether we use the word *sacrament* or not.<sup>2</sup> In this text, when referring to baptism and the Lord's Supper in Protestant teaching, I will use both "ordinances" and "sacraments" interchangeably, and regard them as synonymous in meaning.

Before beginning our discussion of baptism we must recognize that there has been historically, and is today, a strong difference of viewpoint among evangelical Christians regarding this subject. The position advocated in this book is that baptism is not a "major" doctrine that should be the basis of division among genuine Christians,<sup>3</sup> but it is nonetheless a matter of importance for ordinary church life, and it is appropriate that we give it full consideration.

The position advocated in this chapter is "Baptistic" - namely, that *baptism is appropriately administered only to those who give a believable profession of faith in Jesus Christ*. During the discussion, we shall interact particularly with the paedobaptism ("infant baptism") position as advocated by Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology*, since this is a careful and responsible representation of the paedobaptist position, and it is in a widely used systematic theology text.

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<sup>1</sup>A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, says, "No ordinance is a sacrament in the Romanist sense of conferring grace" (p.930). He also says, "The Romanist regards the ordinances as actually conferring grace and producing holiness" (ibid.).

<sup>2</sup>The *American Heritage Dictionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981) allows a range of meanings, defining a sacrament as a rite considered as "a testament to inner grace or a channel that mediates grace."

<sup>3</sup>See chapter 1, pp. 29-30, for a discussion of major and minor doctrines. Not all Christians agree with my view that this is a minor doctrine. Many Christians in previous generations were persecuted and even put to death because they differed with the official

## A. The Mode and Meaning of Baptism

The practice of baptism in the New Testament was carried out in one way: the person **being** baptized was *immersed* or put completely under the water and then brought back up again. Baptism *by immersion* is therefore the “mode” of baptism or the way in which baptism was carried out in the New Testament. This is evident for the following reasons:

(1) The Greek word *baptizō* means “to plunge, dip, immerse” something in water. This is the commonly recognized and standard meaning of the term in ancient Greek literature both inside and outside of the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

(2) The sense “immerse” is appropriate and probably required for the word in several New Testament passages. In Mark 1:5, people were baptized by John “in the river Jordan” (the Greek text has *en*, “in,” and not “beside” or “by” or “near” the river).<sup>5</sup> Mark also tells us that when Jesus had been baptized “he came up out of the water” (Mark 1:10). The Greek text specifies that he came “out of” (*ek*) the water, not that he came away from it (this would be expressed by Gk. *apo*). The fact that John and Jesus went into the river and came up out of it strongly suggests immersion, since sprinkling or pouring of water could much more readily have been done standing beside the river, particularly because multitudes of people were coming for baptism. John’s gospel tells us, further, that John the Baptist “was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there” (John 3:23). Again, it would not take “much water” to baptize people by sprinkling, but it would take much water to baptize by immersion.

Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:38-39). As in the case of Jesus, this baptism occurred when Philip and the eunuch went down into a body of water, and after the baptism they came up out of that body of water. Once again baptism by immersion is the only satisfactory explanation of this narrative.<sup>6</sup>

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state church and its practice of infant baptism. For them, the issue was not merely a ceremony: it was the right to have a believers’ church, one that did not automatically include all the people born in a geographical region. Viewed in this light, the controversy over baptism involves a large difference over the nature of the church: does one become part of a church by birth into a believing family, or by voluntary profession of faith?

<sup>4</sup>So *LSJ*, p. 305: “plunge”; passive, “to be drowned.” Similarly, *BAGD*, p. 131: “dip, immerse,” and middle, “dip oneself, wash (in non-Christian literature also ‘plunge, sink, drench, overwhelm’).” Also Albrecht Oepke, “*baptō, baptizō*, etc.,” in *TDNT*, 1:530: “to immerse... to sink the ship”; passive, “to sink... to suffer shipwreck, to drown (the sense of ‘to bathe’ or ‘to wash’ is only occasionally found in Hellenism... the idea of going under or perishing is nearer the general usage): (ibid.). A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 933-35 gives much additional evidence to this effect.

Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 630, objects and gives some counter-examples, but this evidence is unconvincing because he indiscriminately mixes examples of *baptizō*. (Passages that speak of “bathing” or washing [in the Septuagint, Judith 12:7, for example, and in the New Testament, Mark 7:4] would most likely involve covering one’s body [or hands, in Mark 7:4] completely with water.)

If any New Testament author had wanted to indicate that people were sprinkled with water, a perfectly good Greek word meaning “to sprinkle” was available: *rhantizō* is used in this sense in Heb. 9:13, 19, 21; 10:22; see *BAGD*, p. 734.

<sup>5</sup>Berkhof asks, “Was John the Baptism Capable of the enormous task of immersing the multitudes that flocked unto him at the river Jordan...?” (p. 60). Certainly over a period of several days he would have been capable of immersing many hundreds of people, but it is also possible that his disciples (Matt. 9:14, et al.) assisted him with some of the baptisms.

<sup>6</sup>Berkhof (pp. 630-631) objects that in Acts 8:38 the Greek word *eis* can mean “to” and not necessarily “into”. It is true that the word can take either meaning, but we must also note v. 39, where *ek* certainly means “out of,” not “away from,” which would be expressed by *apo*. And the going down and coming up (*katabainō and anabainō*) are not going down from the chariot and going back up into the chariot, but are specifically said to be going down *into the water* and coming up *out of the water*.

(3) The symbolism of union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection seems to require baptism by immersion. Paul says:

*“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”*  
(Rom. 6:3-4)

Similarly, Paul tells the Colossians, “You were *buried with him in baptism*, in which you were also *raised with him* through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:12).

Now this truth is clearly symbolized in baptism by immersion. When the candidate for baptism goes down into the water it is a picture of going down into the grave and being buried. Coming up out of the water is then a picture of being raised with Christ to walk in newness of life. Baptism thus very clearly pictures death to one’s old way of life and rising to a new kind of life in Christ. But baptism by sprinkling or pouring simply simmes this symbolism.<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes it is objected that the essential thing symbolized in baptism is not death and resurrection with Christ but purification and cleansing from sins. Certainly it is true that water is an evident symbol of washing and cleansing, and the waters of baptism do symbolize washing and purification from sins as well as death and resurrection with Christ. Titus 3:5 speaks of “the washing of regeneration” and, even though the word *baptism* is not used in this text, it is certainly true that there is a cleansing from sin that occurs at the time of conversion. Ananias told Saul, “Rise and be baptized, and *wash away your sins*, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16).

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<sup>7</sup>In fact, the waters of baptism have an even richer symbolism than simply the symbolism of the grave. The waters also remind us of the waters of God’s judgment that came upon unbelievers at the time of the flood (Gen. 7:6-24), or the drowning of the Egyptians in the Exodus (Ex. 14:26-29). Similarly, when Jonah was thrown into the deep (Jonah 1:7-16), he was thrown down to the place of death because of God’s judgment on his disobedience - even though he was miraculously rescued and thus became a sign of the resurrection. Therefore those who go down into the waters of baptism really are going down into the waters of judgment and death, death that they deserve from God for their sins. When they come back up out of the waters of baptism it shows that they have come safely through God’s judgment only because of the merits of Jesus Christ, with whom they are united in his death and resurrection. This is why Peter can say in 1 Peter 3:21 that baptism “corresponds to” the saving of Noah and his family from the waters of judgment in the flood.

Douglas Moo, in Romans 1-8, *Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), argues that baptism in Rom 6 “functions as shorthand for the conversion experience as a whole... It is not, then, that baptism is a symbol of dying and rising with Christ.” (p. 371). He says that “there is no evidence in Romans 6, or in the NT, that the actual physical movements, immersion, and emersion, involved in baptism were accorded symbolical significance” (p. 379). While I agree that baptism in Rom. 6 functions as shorthand for the conversion experience as a whole, it does not seem to me that we can exclude the symbolism of dying and rising with Christ, for the following reasons: (1) The physical actions of going *down into* the water (where human beings cannot live for more than a few minutes) and coming *up out of* the water are so closely parallel to the actions of going down into the grave and coming up out of the grave that the connection is evident from the surface appearance of this actions, and no detailed explanation would be necessary. (2) The Old Testament background of being immersed by waters of God’s judgment confirms this. (3) When Paul says, “You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:12), it is hard to imagine that any of Paul’s readers, even children, would have missed the evident parallel between the actions of baptism and dying and rising with Christ. (This would be true even if, with Moo, we translate Col. 2:12 “*by means of baptism.*”)

But to say that washing away of sins is the only thing (or even the most essential thing) pictured in baptism does not faithfully represent New Testament teaching. Both washing and death and resurrection with Christ are symbolized in baptism, but Romans 6:1-11 and Colossians 2:11-12 place a clear emphasis on dying and rising with Christ. Even the washing is much more effectively symbolized by immersion than by sprinkling or pouring, and death and resurrection with Christ are symbolized only by immersion, not at all by sprinkling or pouring.

What then is the positive meaning of baptism? In all the discussion over the mode of baptism and the disputes over its meaning, it is easy for Christians to lose sight of the significance and beauty of baptism and to disregard the tremendous blessing that accompanies this ceremony. The amazing truths of passing through the waters of judgement safely, or dying and rising with Christ, and of having our sins washed away, are truths of momentous and eternal proportion and ought to be an occasion for giving great glory and praise of God. If churches would teach these truths more clearly, baptisms would be the occasion of much more blessing in the church.

## B. The Subjects of Baptism

The pattern revealed at several places in the New Testament is that only those who give a believable profession of faith should be baptized. This view is often called “believers’ baptism,” since it holds that only those who have themselves believed in Christ (or, more precisely, those who have given reasonable evidence of believing in Christ) should be baptized. This is because baptism, which is a *symbol of beginning the Christian life*, should only be given to those who have *in fact* begun the Christian life.

**1. The Argument From the New Testament Narrative Passages on Baptism.** The narrative examples of those who were baptized suggest that baptism was administered only to those who gave a believable profession of faith. After Peter’s sermon at Pentecost we read, “*Those who received his word were baptized*” (Acts 2:41). The text specifies that baptism was administered to those who “received his word” and therefore trusted in Christ for Salvation.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, when Philip preached the gospel in Samaria, we read, “*When they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women*” (Acts 8:12). Likewise, when Peter preached to the Gentiles in Cornelius’ household, he allowed baptism for those who had heard the Word and *received the Holy Spirit* - that is, for those who had given persuasive evidence of an internal work of regeneration. While Peter was preaching, “the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word” and Peter and his companions “heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God” (Acts 10:44 - 46). Peter’s response was that baptism is appropriate for those who have received the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit: “Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people *who have received the Holy Spirit* just as we have?” Then Peter “commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:47-48). The point of these three passages is that baptism is appropriately given to those who have received the gospel

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<sup>8</sup>Berkhof cautions against making too much of the silence of Scripture regarding infant baptism. Commenting on the fact that in some cases whole households were baptized, he says, “And if there were infants, it is morally certain that they were baptized along with the parents” (p. 634). But this is not what Acts 2:41 says: it specifies that “*those who received his word were baptized,*” not those who did not receive his word but were infants belonging to the households of those who received his word.

and trusted in Christ for salvation. There are other texts that indicate this as well - Acts 16:14-15 (Lydia and her household, after “the Lord opened her heart” to believe); Acts 16:32-33 (the family of the Philippian jailer, after Peter preached “the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house”); and 1 Corinthians 1:16 (the household of Stephanas), but these will be discussed more fully below when we look at the question of “household baptisms.”

**2. The Argument From the Meaning of Baptism.** In addition to these indications from New Testament narratives that baptism always followed upon saving faith, there is a second consideration that argues for believers’ baptism: the outward symbol of *beginning* the Christian life should only be given to those who *show evidence* of having begun the Christian life. The New Testament authors wrote as though they clearly assumed that everyone who was baptized had also personally trusted in Christ and experienced salvation. For example, Paul says, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27). Paul here assumes that baptism is the outward sign of inward regeneration. This simply would not have been true of infants - Paul could not have said, “As many *infants* as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” for infants have not yet come to saving faith or given any evidence of regeneration.<sup>9</sup>

Paul speaks the same way in Romans 6:3-4: “Do you not now that *all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus* were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death.” Could Paul have said this of infants?<sup>10</sup> Could he have said that “all infants who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death” and “were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead”? But if Paul could not have said those things about infants, then those who advocate infant baptism must say that baptism means something different for infants than what Paul says it means for “all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus.” Those who argue for infant baptism at this point resort to what seems to the present author to be vague language about infants being adopted “into the covenant” or “into the covenant community,” but the New Testament does not speak that way about baptism. Rather, it says that all of those who have been baptized have been buried with Christ, have been raised with him, and have put on Christ.

A similar argument can be made from Colossians 2:12: “You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.” But it could not be said of infants that they were buried with Christ, or were raised with him through faith, since they were not yet old enough to exercise faith for themselves.

**3. Alternative #1: The Romans Catholic View.** The Roman Catholic Church teaches that baptism should be administered to infants.<sup>11</sup> The reason for this is that the Catholic Church believes that baptism is *necessary* for salvation, and that the act of baptism itself *causes regeneration*. Therefore, in this view, baptism is a *means* whereby the church bestows saving grace on people. And if it is this kind of a channel of saving grace it should be given to all people.

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<sup>9</sup>This is not to argue that *no* infants can be regenerated (see above, chapter 24, pp. 500 - 501), but simply that *all* infants who have been baptized have begun the Christian life. He is talking in Gal. 3:27 of “as many of you as were baptized into Christ.”

<sup>10</sup>See section 3 below for a response to the Roman Catholic view that baptism causes regeneration.

<sup>11</sup>The act of baptizing an infant, including giving a name to the infant at the time, is sometimes called “christening, especially in Roman Catholic and Episcopalian churches.

Ludwig Ott, in his *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*<sup>12</sup> gives the following explanations: is that Sacrament in which man being washed with water in the name of the Three Divine Persons is spiritually reborn. (p. 350; Ott gives John 3:5, Titus 3:5; and Eph. 5:26 in support of this statement)

Baptism, provided that the proper dispositions (Faith and sorrow for sin) are present, effects: a) the eradication of sins, both original sin and, in the case of adults, also personal, mortal or venial sins; b) inner sanctification by the infusion of sanctifying grace. (p. 354)

Even if it be unworthily received, valid Baptism imprints on the soul of the recipient an indelible spiritual mark, the Baptismal Character....The baptized person is incorporated, by the Baptismal Character, into the Mystical Body of Christ.... Every validly baptized person, even one baptized outside the Catholic Church, becomes a member of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. (p. 355)

Ott goes on to explain that baptism is necessary for salvation and is to be performed only by priests:

Baptism by water... is, since the promulgation of the Gospel, necessary for all men without exception of salvation. (p. 356)<sup>13</sup>

Ott explains that, while baptism is ordinarily to be administered by a priest, in unusual circumstances (such as when a child is in danger of dying soon after birth) it may be performed by a deacon or a layperson. Even baptism performed by unbelievers is thought to be valid, for Ott says:

Yea, even a pagan or a heretic can baptise, provided he adheres to the form of the Church and has the intention of doing what the Church does. (p. 358)

Though infants cannot exercise faith themselves, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that the baptism of infants is valid:

Faith, as it is not the effective cause of justification... need not be present. The faith which infants lack is... replace by the faith of the Church. (p. 359)

Essential to understanding the Roman Catholic view of baptism is the realization that Catholics hold that the sacraments work apart from the faith of the people participating in the sacrament. And if this is so, then it follows that baptism would confer grace even on infants who do not have the ability to exercise faith. Several statements in Ott's book make this clear:

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<sup>12</sup>Trans. by Patrick Lynch, ed. by James Bastible, 4th ed. (Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books, 1960).

<sup>13</sup>In extreme cases Ott and the teaching of the Catholic Church allow for baptism of desire (for one who sincerely longs to be baptized but cannot be) or baptism by blood (in martyrdom).

The Catholic Church teaches that the Sacraments have an objective efficacy, that is, an efficacy independent of the subjective disposition of the recipient or of the minister.... The Sacraments confer grace immediately, that is, without the mediation of Fiducial faith. (pp. 328-29)

The Sacraments of the New Covenant contain the grace which they signify, and bestow it on those who do not hinder it. (p. 328)

The Sacraments work *ex opere operato*... That is, the Sacraments operate by the power of the completed sacramental rite. (p. 329)<sup>14</sup>

The formula "*ex opere operato*" asserts, negatively, that the sacramental grace is not conferred by reason of the subjective activity of the recipient, and positively, that the sacramental grace is caused by the validly operated sacramental sign. (p. 330)

However, Ott is careful to explain that the Catholic teaching must not be interpreted "in the sense of mechanical or magical efficacy" (p. 330). He says,

On the contrary, in the case of the adult recipient faith is expressly demanded... nevertheless the subjective disposition of the recipient is not the cause of grace; it is merely an indispensable precondition of the communication of grace... The measure of the grace effected *ex opere operato* even depends on the grade of the subjective disposition. (p. 330)

In giving a response to this Roman Catholic teaching, we should remember that, the Reformation centered upon this issue. Martin Luther's great concern was to teach that salvation depends on faith alone, not on faith *plus works*. But if baptism and participating in the other sacraments are *necessary for salvation* because they are *necessary* for receiving saving grace, then salvation really is based on faith plus works. In contrast to this, the clear New Testament message is that justification is by faith *alone*. "By grace you have been saved *through faith*; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God - *not because of works*, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Moreover, "the *free gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

The Roman Catholic argument that baptism is necessary for salvation is very similar to the argument of Paul's opponents in Galatia who said that circumcision was necessary for salvation. Paul's response is that those who require circumcision are preaching "a different gospel" (Gal. 1:6). He says that "all who rely on works of the law are under a curse" (Gal. 3:10), and speaks very severely to those who attempt to add any form of obedience as a requirement for justification: "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:4). Therefore, we must conclude that no *work* is necessary for salvation. And therefore *baptism* is not necessary for salvation.

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<sup>14</sup>The phrase *ex opere operato* represents as essential part of Roman Catholic teaching on the sacraments. This Latin phrase literally means "by work performed," and it means that the sacraments work in virtue of the actual activity done, and that the power of the sacraments does not depend on any subjective attitude of faith in the people participating in them.



But what about John 3:5, “Unless one is *born of water* and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”? Although some have understood this as a reference to baptism, it is better understood against the background of the promise of the new covenant in Ezekiel 36:

*I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. (Ezek. 36:25-27)*

Ezekiel here speaks of a “spiritual” washing that will come in the days of the new covenant when God puts his Spirit within his people. In the light of this, to be born of water and the Spirit is a “spiritual” washing that occurs when we are born again, just as we received a spiritual, not a physical, “new heart” at the time as well.

Similarly, Titus 3:5 specifies not water baptism but “the washing of regeneration.” explicitly stating that it is a *spiritual* giving of new life. Water baptism is simply not mentioned in this passage. A spiritual rather than literal washing is also referred to in Ephesians 5:26, where Paul said that Christ gave himself up for the church “that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.” It is the Word of God that does the washing referred to here, not physical water.

As for the Roman Catholic view that baptism conveys grace apart from the subjective disposition of the recipient or the minister (a position that is consistent with baptizing infants, who do not exercise faith for themselves), we must recognize that no New Testament examples exist to prove this view, nor is there New Testament testimony to indicate this. Rather, the narrative accounts of those who were baptized indicate that they had first come to saving faith (see above). And when there are doctrinal statements about baptism they also indicate the need of saving faith. When Paul says, “You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him,” he immediately specifies “*through faith* in the working of God, who raised him from the dead”. (Col. 2:12).

Finally, what about 1 Peter 3:21, where Peter says, “*Baptism... now saves you*”? Does this not give clear support to the Roman Catholic view that baptism itself brings saving grace to the recipient?<sup>15</sup> No, for when Peter uses this phrase he continues in the same sentence to explain exactly what he means by it. He said that baptism saves you “*not as a removal of dirt from the body*” (that is, not as an outward, physical act which washes dirt from the body - that is not the part which saves you), “*but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience*” (that is, as an inward, spiritual transaction between God and the individual, a transaction symbolized by the outward ceremony of baptism). We could paraphrase Peter’s statement by saying, “Baptism now saves you - not the *outward* physical ceremony of baptism but the *inward* spiritual reality which baptism represents.” In this way, Peter guards against any view of baptism that would attribute automatic saving power to the physical ceremony itself.

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<sup>15</sup>The next three paragraphs are adapted from Wayne Grudem, *The first Epistle of Peter*, TNTC (Leicester:IVP, and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 163-65, and are used by permission.

Peter's phrase, "an appeal to God for a clear conscience," is another way of saying "a request for forgiveness of sins and a new heart." When God gives a sinner a "clear conscience," that person has the assurance that every sin has been forgiven and that he or she stands in a right relationship with God (Heb. 9:14 and 10:22 speak this way about the cleansing of one's conscience through Christ). To be baptized rightly is to make such an "appeal" to God: it is to say, in effect, "Please, God, as I enter this baptism which will cleanse my body outwardly I am asking you to cleanse my heart inwardly, forgive my sins, and make me right before you." Understood in this way, baptism is an appropriate symbol for the beginning of the Christian life.<sup>16</sup>

So 1 Peter 3:21 certainly does not teach that baptism saves people automatically or confers grace *ex opere operato*. It does not even teach that the act of baptism itself has saving power, but rather that salvation comes about through the inward exercise of faith that is represented by baptism (cf. Col. 2:12). In fact, Protestants who advocate believers' baptism might well see in 1 Peter 3:21 some support for their position: baptism, it might be argued, is appropriately administered to anyone who is old enough personally to make "an appeal to God for a clear conscience."<sup>17</sup>

In conclusion, the Roman Catholic teachings that baptism is necessary for salvation, that the act of baptism in itself confers saving grace, and that baptism is therefore appropriately administered to infants, are not persuasive in the light of New Testament teachings.

**4. Alternative #2: The Protestant Paedobaptist View.** In contrast both to the Baptist position defended in the earlier part of this chapter and to the Roman Catholic view just discussed, another important view is that baptism is rightly administered to *all infant children of believing parents*. This is a common view in many Protestant groups (especially Lutheran, Episcopalian, Methodist, Presbyterian and Reformed churches). This view is sometimes known as the covenant argument for paedobaptism. It is called a "covenant" argument because it depends on seeing infants born to believers as part of the "covenant community" of God's people. The word "paedobaptism" means the practice of baptizing infants (the prefix *paedo-* means "child" and is derived from the Greek word *pais*, "child").<sup>18</sup> I will be interacting primarily with the arguments put forth by Louis Berkhof, who explains clearly and defends well the paedobaptist position.

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<sup>16</sup>Some have argued that "pledge" is a better word than "appeal" in this verse. Thus, the NIV translates, "the *pledge* of a good conscience towards God." The data from other examples of the word is slim with regard to both meanings, and no conclusions can be drawn from an examination of other uses of the word alone (see discussion in W. Grudem, *1 Peter*, p. 164).

But much more significant is the fact that the translation "pledge" introduces a theological problem. If baptism is a "pledge to God" to maintain a good conscience (or a pledge to live an obedient life, which flows from a good conscience), then the emphasis is no longer on dependence on God to give salvation, but is rather on dependence on one's own effort or strength of resolve. And since this phrase in 1 Peter 3:21 is so clearly connected with the beginning of the Christian life and identified as the feature of baptism that "saves you," the translation "pledge" seems to be inconsistent with the New Testament teaching on salvation by faith alone; it would be the only place where a promise to be righteous is said to be the thing that "saves you." And since the lexical data are inconclusive for both senses (while suggesting that both senses are apparently possible), it is better to adopt the translation "appeal" as a sense much more in accord with the doctrinal teaching of the rest of the New Testament.

<sup>17</sup>Col. 2:12 can be used in the same manner: Paul says that in baptism Christians were "raised with [Christ] *through faith* in the working of God, who raised him from the dead." This presupposes that those who were baptized were exercising faith when they were baptized - that is, that they were old enough to believe.

<sup>18</sup>Roman Catholics are also paedobaptists, but their supporting arguments are different, as explained above (they teach that baptism causes regeneration). In the material that follows, I will be comparing a Protestant defense of *paedobaptism* with a Protestant defense of *believers' baptism*. Therefore, I will use the term *paedobaptist* to refer to Protestant paedobaptists who hold to a covenant paedobaptist position.

The argument that infants of believers should be baptized depends primarily on the following three points:

**a. Infants Were Circumcised in the Old Covenant:** In the Old Testament, circumcision was the outward *sign* of entrance into the covenant community or the community of God's people. Circumcision was administered to all Israelite children (that is, male children) when they were eight days old.

**b. Baptism Is Parallel to Circumcision:** In the New Testament, the outward sign of entrance into the "covenant community" is baptism. Therefore baptism is the New Testament counterpart to circumcision. It follows that baptism should be administered to all infant children of believing parents. To deny them this benefit is to deprive them of a privilege and benefit that is rightfully theirs - the *sign* of belonging to the community of God's people, the "covenant community." The parallel between circumcision and baptism is seen quite clearly in Colossians 2:

In him also *you were circumcised* with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and *you were buried with him in baptism*, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Col.2:11-12)

Here it is said that Paul makes an explicit connection between circumcision and baptism.

**c. Household Baptism:** Further support for the practice of baptizing infants is found in the "household baptisms" reported in Acts and the epistles, particularly the baptism of the household of Lydia (Acts 16:15), the family of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:33), and the household of Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:16). It is also claimed that Acts 2:39, which declares that the promised blessing of the gospel is "to you and to your children," supports this practice.

In response to these arguments for paedobaptism, the following points may be made:

(1) It is certainly true that baptism and circumcision are in many ways similar, but we must not forget that what they symbolize is also different in some important ways. The old covenant had a *physical external means of entrance* into the "covenant community." One became a Jew by being born of Jewish parents. Therefore all Jewish males were circumcised. Circumcision was not restricted to people who had true inward spiritual life, but rather was given to *all who lived among the people of Israel*. God said:

Every male among you shall be circumcised... He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house, or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, but *he that is born in your house and he that is bought with your money*, shall be circumcised. (Gen. 17:10-13)

It was not only the physical descendants of the people of Israel who were circumcised but also those *servants* who were purchased by them and lived among them. The presence or absence of inward spiritual life made no difference whatsoever in the question of whether one was

circumcised. So “Abraham took Ishmael his son *and all the slaves born in his house or bought with his money*, every male among the men of Abraham’s house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him” (Gen. 17:23, cf. Josh. 5:4).

We should realize that circumcision was given to every male living among the people of Israel even though *true circumcision* is something inward and spiritual: “Real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal” (Rom 2:29). Moreover, Paul in the New Testament explicitly states that “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (Rom 9:6). But even though there was at the time of the Old Testament (and more fully in the time of the New Testament) a realization of the inward spiritual reality that circumcision was intended to represent, there was *no attempt* to restrict circumcision only to those whose hearts were *actually circumcised spiritually* and who had genuine saving faith. Even among the adult males, circumcision was applied to everyone, not just those who gave evidence of inward faith.

(2) But under the new covenant the situation is very different. The New Testament does not talk about a “covenant community” made up of believers and their unbelieving children and relatives and servants who happen to live among them. (In fact, in the discussion of baptism, the phrase “covenant community” made up of believers *and* their unbelieving children and relatives and servants who happen to live among them (In fact, in the discussion of baptism, the phrase “covenant community” as used by paedobaptists often tends to function as a broad and vague term that blurs the differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament on this matter.) In the New Testament church, the only question that matters is whether one has saving faith and has been spiritually incorporated into the body of Christ, the true church. The only “covenant community” discussed is *the church*, the fellowship of redeemed.

But how does one become a member of the church? The means of entrance into the church is *voluntary, spiritual, and internal*. One becomes a member of the true church by being *born again* and by having *saving faith*, not by physical birth. It comes about not by an external act, but by internal faith in one’s heart. It is certainly true that baptism is the sign of entrance into the church, but this means that it should only be given to those who *give evidence* of membership in the church, only to those who profess faith in Christ.<sup>19</sup>

We should not be surprised that there was a change from the way the covenant community was entered in the Old Testament (physical birth) to the way the church is entered in the New Testament (spiritual birth). There are many analogous changes between the old and new covenants in other areas as well. While the Israelites fed on physical manna in the wilderness, New Testament believers feed on Jesus Christ, the true bread that comes down from heaven (John 6:48-51). The Israelites drank physical water that gushed from the rock in the wilderness, but those who believe in Christ drink of the living water of eternal life that he gives (John 4:10-14). The old covenant had a physical temple to which Israel came for worship, but in the new covenant believers are build into a spiritual temple (1 Peter 2:5). Old covenant believers offered physical sacrifices of animals and crops upon an altar, but New Testament believers offer “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5; cf. Heb. 13:15-16). Old covenant

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<sup>19</sup>At this point an advocate of paedobaptism may ask whether we should not have an idea of a “covenant community” in the New Testament church which is broader than the church and includes unbelieving children who belong to church families. But the New Testament speaks of no such community, nor does it give indication that unbelieving children of believing parents are members of the new covenant. And it certainly does not speak of baptism as a sign of entrance into such a broader group. Baptism symbolizes new birth and entrance into the church.

believers received from God the physical land of Israel which he had promised to them, but New Testament believers receive “a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:16). In the same way, in the old covenant those who were the physical seed or descendants of Abraham were members of the people of Israel, but in the New Testament those who are the spiritual “seed” or descendants of Abraham by faith are members of the church (Gal. 3:29; cf Rom. 4:11-12).

In all these contrasts we see the truth of the distinction that Paul emphasizes between the old covenant and the new covenant. The physical elements and activities of the old covenant were “only a shadow of what is to come,” but the true reality, the “substance,” is found in the new covenant relationship which we have in Christ (Col. 2:17). Therefore it is consistent with this change of systems that infant (male) children would automatically be circumcised in the old covenant, since their physical descent and physical presence in the community of Jewish people meant that they were members of that community in which faith was not an entrance requirement. But in the new covenant it is appropriate that infants *not* be baptized, and that baptism only be given to those who give evidence of genuine saving faith, because membership in the church is based on an internal spiritual reality, not on physical descent.

(3) The examples of household baptisms in the New Testament are really not decisive for one position or another. When we look at the actual examples more closely, we see that in a number of them there are indications of saving faith on the part of all of those baptized. For example, it is true the family of the Philippian jailer was baptized (Acts 16:33), but it is also true that Paul and Silas “spoke the word of the Lord to him and *to all that were in his house*” (Acts 16:32). If the Word of the Lord was spoken to all in the house, there is an assumption that all were old enough to understand the word and believe it. Moreover, after the family had been baptized, we read that the Philippian jailer “*rejoiced with all his household* that he had believed in God” (Acts 16:34). So we have not only a household baptism but also a household reception of the Word of God and a household rejoicing in faith in God. These facts suggest quite strongly that the entire household had individually come to faith in Christ.

With regard to the fact that Paul baptized “the household of Stephanas” (1 Cor. 1:16), we must also note that Paul says at the end of 1 Corinthians that “the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints” (1 Cor. 16:15). So they were not only baptized; they were also converted and had worked at serving other believers. Once again the example of *household baptism* gives indication of *household faith*.

In fact, there are other instances where baptism is not mentioned but where we see explicit testimony to the fact that an entire household had come to faith. After Jesus healed the official’s son, we read that the father “himself believed, *and all his household*” (John 4:53). Similarly, when Paul preached at Corinth, “Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, *believed* in the Lord, *together with all his household*” (Acts 18:8).

This means that of all the examples of “household baptisms” in the New Testament, the only one that does not have some indication of household faith as well is Acts 16:14-15, speaking of Lydia: “The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul. And when she was baptized, with her household.” The text simply does not contain any information about whether there were infants in her household or not. It is ambiguous and certainly not weighty evidence for infant baptism. It must be considered inconclusive in itself.

With regard to Peter’s statement at Pentecost that “the promise is to you and to your children,” we should note that the sentence continues as follows: “For the promise is to you and to

your children and to all that are far off, *every one whom the Lord our God calls to him*" (Acts 2:39). Moreover, the same paragraph specifies not that believers and unbelieving children were baptized, but that "*those who received his word* were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41).

(4) A further argument in objection to the paedobaptist position can be made when we ask the simple question, "What does baptism *do*?" In other words, we might ask, "What does it actually accomplish? What benefit does it bring?"

Roman Catholics have a clear answer to this question: Baptism *causes* regeneration. And Baptists have a clear answer: Baptism *symbolizes* the fact that inward regeneration has occurred. But paedobaptists cannot adopt either of these answers. They do not want to say that baptism causes regeneration, nor are they able to say (with respect to infants) that it symbolizes a regeneration that has already occurred.<sup>20</sup> The only alternative seems to be to say that it symbolizes a regeneration that will occur in the future, when the infant is old enough to come to saving faith. But even that is not quite accurate, because it is not certain that the infant will be regenerated in the future - some infants who are baptized never come to saving faith later. So the most accurate paedobaptist explanation of what baptism symbolizes is that it symbolizes *probably future regeneration*.<sup>21</sup> It does not cause regeneration, nor does it symbolize actual regeneration; therefore it must be understood as symbolizing probable regeneration at some time in the future.

But at this point it seems apparent that the paedobaptist understanding of baptism is quite different from that of the New Testament. The New Testament never views baptism as something that symbolizes a probable future regeneration. The New Testament authors do not say, "Can anyone forbid water for baptizing those who will probably someday be saved?" (cf. Acts 10:47), or, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ will probably someday put on Christ" (cf. Gal. 3:27), or "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus will probably someday be baptized into his death?" (cf. Rom. 6:3). This is simply not the way the New Testament speaks of baptism. Baptism in the New Testament is a sign of being born again, being cleansed from sin, and beginning the Christian life. It seems fitting to reserve this sign for those who give evidence that that is actually true in their lives.

One other perspective on the symbolism of baptism is given by Michael Green.<sup>22</sup> He says:

Infant baptism stresses the objectivity of the gospel. It points to the solid achievement of Christ crucified and risen, whether or not we respond to it... Not that we gain anything from it unless we repent and believe. But it is the standing demonstration that our salvation does not depend on our own very fallible faith; it depends on what God has done for us. (p. 76)

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<sup>20</sup>However, some Protestant paedobaptists will *presume* that regeneration has occurred (and the evidence will be seen later). Others, including many Episcopalians and Lutherans, would say that regeneration occurs at the time of baptism.

<sup>21</sup>This is not a quotation from any specific paedobaptist writer, but is my own conclusion from the logic of the paedobaptist position, which would seem to require this understanding of what paedobaptism signifies with respect to regeneration.

<sup>22</sup>Michael Green, *Baptism: Its Purpose, Practice, and Power* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, and Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987). This book contains an excellent statement of a paedobaptist position, and also contains much helpful analysis of the biblical teaching about baptism which both sides could endorse.

He goes on to say:

Infant baptism stresses the initiative of God in salvation... Should it be attached primarily to man's response, or to God's initiative? That is the heart of the question... For the Baptist, baptism primarily bears witness to what *we do* in responding to the grace of God. For the paedobaptist, it primarily bears witness to what *God has done* to make it all possible. (pp. 76-77, emphasis his)

But several points can be noted in response to Green. (a) His analysis at this point overlooks the fact that baptism does not *only* symbolize Christ's death and resurrection; as we have seen in the foregoing analysis of New Testament texts, it *also* symbolizes the application of redemption to us, as a result of our response of faith. Baptism pictures the fact that we have been united with Christ in his death and resurrection, and the washing with water symbolizes that we have been cleansed from our sins. In saying that the paedobaptist stresses God's initiative and the Baptist stresses man's response, Green has presented the reader with two incorrect alternatives from which to choose, because baptism pictures both of these and more. Baptism pictures (i) Christ's redemptive work, (ii) my response in faith (as I come to be baptized), and (iii) God's application of the benefits of redemption to my life. Believers' baptism pictures all three aspects (not just my faith, as Green suggests), but according to Green's view paedobaptism pictures only the first one. It is not a question of which is "primary"; it is a question of which view of baptism includes all that baptism stand for.

(b) When Green says that our salvation does not depend on our faith but on God's work, the expression "depend on" is capable of various interpretations. If "depend on" means "what we rely on," then of course both sides would agree that we rely on Christ's work, not on our faith. If "depend on" means that faith does not have any merit in itself whereby we can earn favor with God, then also both sides would agree. But if "depend on" means it makes no difference to our salvation whether we believe or not, then neither side would agree: Green himself says in the previous sentence that baptism does us no good unless we repent and believe. Therefore if baptism in any way represents the application of redemption to a person's life, then it is not enough to practice a form of baptism that *only* pictures Christ's death and resurrection; we should also picture our response in faith and the subsequent application of redemption to us. By contrast, on Green's view there is a real danger of portraying a view (which Green would disagree with) that people will have salvation applied to them by God whether they believe or not.

(5) Finally, those who advocate believers' baptism often express concern about the practical consequences of paedobaptism. They argue that the practice of paedobaptism in actual church life frequently leads persons baptized in infancy to presume that they have been regenerated, and thereby they fail to feel the urgency of their need to come to personal faith in Christ. Over a period of years, this tendency is likely to result in more and more *unconverted* members of the "covenant community" - members who are not truly members of Christ's church. Of course, this would not make a paedobaptist church a false church, but it would make it a less-pure church, and one that will frequently be fighting tendencies toward liberal doctrine or other kinds of unbelief that are brought in by the unregenerate sector of the membership.

### C. The Effect of Baptism

We have argued above that baptism symbolizes regeneration or spiritual rebirth. But does it only symbolize? Or is there some way in which it is also a “means of grace,” that is, a means that the Holy Spirit uses to bring blessing to people? We have already discussed this question in the previous chapter,<sup>23</sup> so here it only is necessary to say that when baptism is properly carried out then of course it brings some spiritual benefit to believers as well. There is the blessing of God’s favor that comes with all obedience, as well as the joy that comes through public profession of one’s faith, and the reassurance of having a clear physical picture of dying and rising with Christ and of washing away sins. Certainly the Lord gave us baptism to strengthen and encourage our faith - and it should do so for everyone who is baptized and for every believer who witnesses a baptism.

### D. The Necessity of Baptism

While we recognize that Jesus commanded baptism (Matt.28:19), as did the apostles (Acts 2:38), we should not say that baptism is *necessary* for salvation.<sup>24</sup> This question was discussed to some extent above under the response to the Roman Catholic view of baptism. To say that baptism or any other action is *necessary* for salvation is to say that we are not justified by faith alone, but by faith plus a certain “work,” the work of baptism. The apostle Paul would have opposed the idea that baptism is necessary for salvation just as strongly as he opposed the similar idea that circumcision was necessary for salvation (see Gal. 5:1-12).

Those who argue that baptism is necessary for salvation often point to Mark 16:16: “*He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.*” But the very evident answer to this is simply to say that the verse says nothing about those who *believe and are not baptized*. The verse is simply talking about general cases without making a pedantic qualification for the unusual case of someone who believes and is not baptized. But certainly the verse should not be pressed into service and made to speak of something it is not talking about.<sup>25</sup>

More to the point is Jesus’ statement to the dying thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). The thief could not be baptized before he died on the cross, but he was certainly saved that day. Moreover, the force of this point cannot be evaded by arguing that the thief was saved under the old covenant (under which baptism was not necessary to salvation), because the new covenant took effect at the death of Jesus (see Heb. 9:17), and Jesus died *before* either of the two thieves who were crucified with him (see John 19:32-33).

Another reason by Baptism is not necessary for salvation is that our justification from sins takes place at the point of saving faith, not at the point of water baptism, which usually occurs later.<sup>26</sup> But

<sup>23</sup>See chapter 48, pp. 954

<sup>24</sup>At this point I am differing not only with Roman Catholic teaching, but also with the teaching of several Protestant denominations that teach that, in some sense, baptism is necessary for salvation. Although there are different nuances in their teaching, such a position is held by many Episcopalians, and Lutherans, and by the Churches of Christ.

<sup>25</sup>Moreover, it is doubtful whether this verse should be used in support of a theological position at all, since there are many ancient manuscripts that do not have this verse (or Mark 16:9-20), and it seems most likely that this verse was not in the gospel as Mark originally wrote it. (See discussion of Mark 16:9-20 in chapter 17, p. 365.)

<sup>26</sup>See discussion of justification in chapter 36, pp. 722-35.



if a person is already justified and has sins forgiven eternally at the point of saving faith, then baptism is not necessary for forgiveness of sins, or for the bestowal of new spiritual life.<sup>27</sup>

Baptism, then, is not necessary for salvation. But it is necessary if we are to be obedient to Christ, for he commanded baptism for all who believe in him.

## E. The Age for Baptism

Those who are convinced by the arguments for believers' baptism must then begin to ask, "How old should children be before they are baptized?"

The most direct answer is that they should be old enough to give a *believable* profession of faith. It is impossible to set a precise age that will apply to every child, but when parents see convincing evidence of genuine spiritual life, and also some degree of understanding regarding the meaning of trusting in Christ, then baptism is appropriate. Of course, this will require careful administration by the church, as well as a good explanation by parents in their homes. The exact age for baptism will vary from child to child, and somewhat from church to church as well.<sup>28</sup>

## F. Remaining questions

**1. Do Churches Need to Be Divided Over Baptism?** In spite of many years of division over this question among Protestants, is there a way in which Christians who differ on baptism can demonstrate greater unity of fellowship? And is there a way that progress can be made in bringing the church closer to unity on this question?

Much progress in this regard has already been made. Christians who differ over baptism already demonstrate their unity in Christ through individual fellowship, Bible studies and prayer groups in their communities, occasional joint worship services; cooperation in city and regional evangelistic campaigns, joint support of many mission agencies and other parachurch groups, joint sponsorship for youth activities, pastor's fellowship groups, and so forth. Although baptism remains a difference, that difference does not generally lead to harmful divisions. In fact, most Christians seem to realize that baptism is not a major doctrine of the faith.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup>See chapter 34, pp. 699-708, for a discussion of regeneration.

<sup>28</sup>I participated in baptizing my own three children at a time when each was between seven and ten years old and showed a fair degree of understanding of the gospel together with genuine evidence of faith in Christ. In all three cases, I think they could have been baptized somewhat earlier, but we delayed out of deference to the ordinary pattern followed by the churches we were in, whereby children under seven were not usually baptized. (Among Baptists in the United Kingdom it is customary to wait until children are somewhat older than this, however.)

<sup>29</sup>I realize that some readers will object to this sentence and will say that baptism is *very important* because of what the differing positions represent: differing views of the nature of the church. Many Baptists would argue that *practicing* infant baptism is inherently inconsistent with the idea of a church made up of believers only, and many paedobaptists would argue that *not practicing* infant baptism is inherently inconsistent with the idea of a covenant community that includes the children of believers.

I would encourage those who reason this way to consider how much they hold in common with evangelical believers on the other side of this issue - not necessarily with those far from them on other matters as well, but especially with those on the other side who agree with them on most other aspects of the Christian life. Many Baptists *do* encourage and demonstrate a valued place for their children within their churches, and many paedobaptists *do* pray for the salvation of their *baptized* children with the same fervency with which Baptist parents pray for the salvation of their *unbaptized* children. Regarding church membership, evangelical paedobaptists *do* require a believable profession of faith before children can become full members of the church (their term is "communicant members"; that is, those who take Communion). They also require a believable profession of faith before any adults are allowed to join the church.

A very few denominations have decided that they would allow both views of baptism to be taught and practiced within their denominations. The Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) does this, for example, as a result of a “compromise” reached in 1950 when the denomination was formed from two different groups that had different views on baptism. The EFCA allows ordination for pastors who hold to believer’s baptism and for pastors who hold to infant baptism. And they allow into membership those who had been baptized as infants in a Christian church, without requiring them to be baptized as believers before joining the church. If some parents want to have their infant child baptized and the local pastor does not hold to infant baptism, the local church invites some other Evangelical Free Church pastor who holds to infant baptism to come and baptize the infant.

Although the Evangelical Free Church continues as a strong, healthy denomination today, there remain some difficulties inherent in this position. One is that there can be a tendency to minimize the importance of baptism: since members disagree on this topic, it is easier not to talk about it much or emphasize its importance.

But the most serious difficulty arises when people begin to think about what such a “compromise position” implies about the views of baptism held by the people who go along with this compromise. For people who hold to infant baptism, they have to be able to say that it is acceptable for believing parents not to baptize their infant children. But according to a paedobaptist view, this seems close to saying that it is acceptable for these parents to disobey a command of Scripture regarding the responsibility of parents to baptize their children. How can they really say this?

On the other side, those who hold to believer’s baptism (as I do) would have to be willing to admit into church membership people who have been baptized as infants, and who did not make a personal profession of faith at the time they were baptized. But from a believer’s baptism position, genuine baptism has to follow a personal profession of faith. So how can believer’s baptism advocates in good conscience say that infant baptism is also a valid form of baptism? That contradicts what they believe about the essential nature of baptism - that it is an outward sign of an inward spiritual change, so that the apostle Paul could say, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27).<sup>30</sup>

For someone who holds to believer’s baptism, admitting to church membership someone who has not been baptized upon profession of faith, and telling the person that he or she never has to be baptized as a believer, is really giving up one’s view on the proper nature of baptism. It is saying that infant baptism really is valid baptism! But then how could anyone who holds to this position tell anyone who had been baptized as an infant that he or she still needed to be baptized as a believer? This difficulty makes me think that some kind of “compromise” position on baptism is not very likely to be adopted by denominational groups in the future.

However, we should still be thankful that believers who differ on the issue of baptism can have wonderful fellowship with one another across denominational lines and can have respect for each other’s sincerely held views.

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When these procedures are functioning well, both Baptists and paedobaptists use very similar procedures as they seek to have a church membership consisting of believers only, and both love and teach and pray for their children as most precious members of the larger church family who they hope will someday become true members of the body of Christ.

<sup>30</sup>I did not realize this difficulty when I first published this book in 1994. I have revised this entire section for the 2007 printing.

**2. Who Can Baptize?** Finally, we may ask, “Who can perform the ceremony of baptism? Can only ordained clergy perform this ceremony?”

We should recognize here that Scripture simply does not specify any restrictions on who can perform the ceremony of baptism. Those churches that have a special priesthood through which certain actions (and blessings) come (such as Roman Catholics, and to some extent Anglicans) will wish to insist that only properly ordained clergy should baptize in ordinary circumstances (though exceptions could be made in unusual circumstances). But if we truly believe in the priesthood of all believers (see 1 Peter 2:4-10), then there seems to be no need *in principle* to restrict the right to perform baptism only to ordained clergy.

However, another consideration arises: Since baptism is the sign of entrance into the body of Christ, the church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13 on inward spiritual baptism), then it seems appropriate that it be done *within the fellowship of the church* wherever possible, so that the church as a whole can rejoice with the person being baptized and so that the faith of all believers in that church might be built up.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, since baptism is a sign of beginning the Christian life and therefore of beginning life in the true church as well, it is fitting that the local church be assembled to give testimony to this fact and to give visible welcome to the baptized person. Also, in order that the people being baptized have a right understanding of what actually is happening, it is right for the church to safeguard the practice of baptism and keep it from abuse. Finally, if baptism is the sign of entering the fellowship of the visible church, then it seems appropriate that some officially designated representative or representatives of the church be selected to administer it. For these reasons it is usually the ordained clergy who baptize, but there seems to be no reason why the church from time to time, and where it deems it appropriate, might not call on other church officers or mature believers to baptize new converts. For example, someone effective in evangelism in a local church may be an appropriately designed person to baptize people who have come to Christ through the practice of that person’s evangelistic ministry. (Note in Acts 8:12 that Philip preached the gospel in Samaria and then apparently baptized those who came to faith in Christ.)

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<sup>31</sup>The fact that baptism is an outward sign of *entrance* into the church, the body of Christ, would also make it appropriate to require baptism before someone is counted as a member of a local church.

## QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Have you been baptized? When? If you were baptized as a believer, what was the effect of the baptism on your Christian life (if any)? If you were baptized as an infant, what effect did the knowledge of your baptism have in your own thinking when you eventually learned that you had been baptized as an infant?
2. What aspects of the meaning of baptism have you come to appreciate more as a result of reading this chapter (if any)? What aspects of the meaning of baptism would you like to see taught more clearly in your church?
3. When baptism occur in your church, are they a time of rejoicing and praise to God? What do you think is happening to the person being baptized at that moment (if anything)? What do you think should be happening?
4. Have you modified your own view on the question of infant baptism versus believers' baptism as a result of reading this chapter? In what way?
5. What practical suggestions can you make for helping to overcome the differences among Christians on the question of baptism?
6. How can baptism be an effective help to evangelism in your church? Have you seen it function in this way?