



“Innovations and the Divine Pattern”

Part IV: Innovations in Baptism

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The long history of Christianity traces a path of change and departure from the original model of Christ’s church as it is revealed in the New Testament. The plea of churches of Christ around the world is to return to that pattern and to the simplicity that is found in Christ. In our last study, we looked at how church government evolved from the simple structure of qualified elders being appointed in each congregation to govern therein to an unbiblical hierarchy of power superseding the local church. This opened the door everywhere for churches to slowly be led away from the truth in many areas as men began to introduce doctrines and practices foreign to the teachings and traditions of the apostles. Today, we want to look at one such departure in doctrine, and that is the doctrine of baptism. We’ll take our text from Matthew’s account of the great commission.

Matthew 28:18-20 “And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

The apostles were to fill the earth with Christ’s doctrine. They were to make disciples of Christ by baptizing those who believed the gospel and then teach them to observe the ordinances of the Christian life. What place did baptism occupy in the preaching of the apostles? What was baptism as practiced by the early church? Who was to be baptized? When, how, and why were they to be baptized? And how did it change in the centuries to come? It DID change--not only in form, but in meaning. Those are all important questions that the Bible answers in plain and simple terms.

It can't be denied that baptism was a significant thing in the early church and in the preaching of the gospel. The Bible does not merely make a passing reference or two to baptism. Rather, it places a certain emphasis of urgency upon it. Look at Mark's account of the great commission:

Mark 16:15-16 "And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."

The book of **Acts** is an inspired account of how the apostles fulfilled that commission and took the gospel to the world, beginning in **Acts 2**, the day that the church of Christ began. Peter preached the gospel of the crucified and risen Christ on the Day of Pentecost, convincing and convicting some three thousand Jews of their sins. And they cried out to Peter and the other apostles wanting to know what they were to do to obtain forgiveness of their sins. Listen carefully to Peter's response:

Acts 2:38 "Repent, and be baptized every one of you (That's a commandment, and it is to every single person who would believe in Christ) **in the name of Jesus Christ** (or by Christ's authority; He commanded it in the passages we've already read) **for the remission of sins...**"

According to **verses 41 & 47**, they obeyed by turning from their sins and being baptized. They were forgiven of their sins and thus saved, and the Lord added them all to the church. Please notice the contrast between that and what is most often preached today. Friend, when you desired to know how to be saved once upon a time, did a preacher tell you to simply receive Christ into your heart? Were you told to stop wherever you were at the time and bow your head, close your eyes, and repeat the sinner's prayer, maybe while listening to a preacher over the television or radio? Were you called forward at a service, maybe to an altar where people surrounded you and prayed with you until you felt confident that your sins were gone, and you had the peace and assurance of salvation? Perhaps you were sprinkled with water as a baby or a small child before you even had the capacity to believe the gospel, repent of sin, and confess Christ.

Did you know that ALL of those ideas that I've just described are the result of changes and departures from what the apostles taught about salvation and baptism? You can never read of anyone being told by any apostle to repeat a prayer of any kind or wait for a feeling, or sign a pledge, or receive Christ into their heart by simply believing. Rather, in **Acts 2, Acts 8, Acts 9, Acts 10, Acts 16, Acts 18, Acts 19**—in all of those chapters where we have specific accounts of people being saved or converted, they were always immersed in water WHEN they heard and believed the gospel. Baptism was not a church ordinance; it was a gospel ordinance. It was commanded of believing, penitent sinners who desired to have their sins washed away and to enter into Christ. Consider these plain scriptures:

Acts 22:16 (Ananias speaking to Saul) "And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord."

Acts 8:35-38 "Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him (the Ethiopian nobleman) Jesus. And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him."

Acts 16:30-33 “And (the jailer) brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway.”

Titus 3:5 “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;”

I Peter 3:21 “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer(or *appeal*) of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ:”

Galatians 3:26-27 “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”

Colossians 2:12 “Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.”

Well, what do all of these passages show us? 1) Baptism was commanded of every person who believed the gospel and wanted to be saved. 2) Our sins are washed away by virtue of the blood of Christ when we are baptized. 3) We are *reborn* or *regenerated* as we are being washed. 4) We are saved by the resurrection of Christ when we're baptized. 5) We enter into a relationship with Christ and *put on Christ* not before, but when we are baptized into Him. 6) This baptism is a burial and something we are raised from; in other words, an immersion in water.

So, why is the same emphasis not placed on this divine commandment today? I know that churches today still baptize people, but they don't do so for the same reasons or at the same time or, in many cases, in the same manner as the apostles did in the first century. Why is that? Because over the centuries, like in so many other ways, men departed from apostolic teaching on this Bible subject. One of the earliest departures took place in about the year 250 AD when sprinkling was first substituted for baptism.

The apostles and the original church did not sprinkle or pour water on a person for baptism. They immersed people in water. It was and is a likeness of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.

Romans 6:3-5 “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection:”

The word *baptize* is actually an unfortunate but common rendering of the Greek word *baptizo*. That is the word used in the original language and it means *to dip, submerge, or plunge*. In other words, just as **Romans 6:4** and **Colossians 2:12** indicate, it is *an immersion or burial in water*. In **Acts 8:36**, when the Ethiopian nobleman saw an oasis or pool of water, he said this to Philip:

Acts 8:36 “...”See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?”

We're told in **verse 38-39** that ***both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and they came up out of the water.*** So, notice that when the preachers of the first century baptized people, they did so in water, not with water. This was the universal practice of the church for more than 200 years. But in 250 AD, as far as history records, the first person to have water sprinkled on him as a substitute for baptism was a man named Novatian. He was very sick and on his deathbed. So, as an exception, sprinkling was used and hesitatingly called baptism. Notice at this early juncture that it was considered an alternative only in the extreme case of baptizing the sick, and only then 200 years after apostolic times.

It wasn't until 503 years after that when in the eighth century (753 AD), pope Steven decreed that it was acceptable to sprinkle for baptism in cases where such was deemed "necessary." (Remember that by this time, change and innovation had corrupted the government of the church and there was now a pope or universal ruler over the church.) It still was not the usual custom, but by this point, it was allowed by the pope. It wasn't until the year 1311 that the legislative council of the catholic church at that time declared it a complete matter of indifference whether a person was immersed or sprinkled for baptism. 1300 years of apostolic doctrine was upended by a council of men who took such authority upon themselves. That ought to tell us something about councils, conventions, and so forth.

Today, sprinkling is widely practiced--not only by the catholic religion, but also by several protestant denominations including the church of England. It was the King of England, the head of the Anglican church, who commissioned the translation of the Bible into English in 1611. Because the original text and the original word *baptizo* refers to *immersion*, but the commonly accepted practice of the church of England (just like Catholicism) was to sprinkle, instead of translating the word *baptizo* to *immerse* as it really should've been, they anglicized or transliterated the word to simply be *baptize* so that sprinkling could be considered scriptural. But, friend, it is NOT scriptural. If you were sprinkled for baptism, you were not scripturally baptized.

Then came the concept of 'baptismal regeneration' in the sense that catholic leaders began to teach that instead of baptism being an obedient response to faith, they began to refer to it as a sacrament. It is considered one of the seven sacraments of the church according to catholic doctrine. Other sacraments include the Lord's Supper and so on, but the Bible never uses the term sacrament. Baptism is never referred to a such.

Sacrament is defined by men as *a rite in which something is mystically conveyed on one who practices it.* Thus, baptism became a mystical, almost magical rite where salvation was obtained, blessings were received, even apart from faith and repentance. In other words, there was a certain efficacy in baptism within and by itself. That's how the doctrine of infant baptism came to be, and the Bible never teaches that either. Even the baptism of the unborn came to be. But, you see, a baby has no sins of which to repent. Neither can a baby believe anything, so babies cannot believe in, much less confess Christ, which Philip said was a prerequisite for the baptism of the eunuch (**Acts 8:37**).

Why do so many churches baptize or sprinkle babies? They do so because they are observing the traditions of men which came about through change and innovation and not the traditions of Christ and His apostles. Some continue this practice today, believing that blessings are conveyed through baptism alone. Now, the Bible is clear that baptism is necessary for salvation. We've pointed to several passages that make that abundantly plain. But there is nothing mystical or magical in the water of baptism. It is not a sacrament.

Baptism only accomplishes what God said that it would through faith. It only does what God said it would do when it is the response of faith and is preceded by repentance. If faith and repentance are not present in that act of gospel obedience, then a person just gets wet. Nothing is conferred to such a person. One does not earn or merit anything in baptism either; rather, when one in faith obeys Christ by being immersed in His name for the remission of sins, Christ promises that that penitent believer, through his faith and the blood of Christ, will be saved.

Today, most protestant denominations practice baptism merely as an outward sign or symbol for the Christian to later act out and nothing else. Or they see it as a gateway to membership within their denomination. This, too, is a corruption of the Bible doctrine of baptism. Such baptisms are not scriptural and are not the baptism commanded by Christ. How did that idea come about that is so widely accepted and taken for granted today? It is because the protestant reformation and its leaders threw the baby out with the bath water.

The Swiss reformer, Huldrych Zwingli, was one of the first ones to teach that baptism was merely an outward sign of an inward grace. He lived at the beginning of the sixteenth century and he rejected the catholic form of baptismal regeneration, which IS wrong and unscriptural, calling it a works-based salvation, which it is. But in rightly rejecting that, what they did was relegate baptism to an act of obedience to one who is already saved. But the Bible doesn't teach that either. The truth lies between the two extremes: one is saved at the time of baptism, but it is through the faith that is manifest in his baptism into Christ.

Then, in the eighteenth century, there was the launch of 'The Great Awakening,' where emphasis began to be placed upon individual experiences as opposed to doctrine recognized and practiced by the church. In other words, instead of God having a plan of salvation, you waited and prayed for some experience. It was an emotionally based thing, this emotionalism and experiential religion, and it paved the way for men like Charles Finney and others who began the practices of *altar calls* and inviting people to what came to be known as the *anxious seat* (later, *the mourner's bench*) where you come and pray and pray until you pray through, finally obtaining salvation. Dwight Moody didn't like the public pressure placed upon people using such means, so he and others around the turn of the century began what was called *the inquiry room* where people could be taken aside at these meetings by counselors to help them be saved.

In the twentieth century, enter Billy Sunday and later, Billy Graham, who popularized the well-known *sinner's prayer*: wherever you are, just pray a simple prayer confessing your sins, inviting Christ into your heart. Friend, none of that is found in your Bible. There is not one example of conversion as the gospel was preached by the apostles beginning on the Day of Pentecost where anyone was ever told to pray just asking Christ to enter into their heart. No, rather we have clear examples time and time again throughout the book of **Acts** what happened when people came to believe in Christ through the preaching of the gospel and they turned from their sins in repentance, confessing Christ, and they were then baptized for the remission of their sins. What we have in the religious world today is all the result of a slow and gradual change and departure from the gospel preached in the first century to what we now see accepted by the majority of people in the modern age.

Friend, if you want to be saved, the gospel plan is simple. You can't listen to men; you have to listen to what the New Testament teaches. It teaches that having heard the gospel--the good news that Christ died for your sins and rose again, would you believe it (**John 8:24**)? Would you make a decision today to repent of your sins, right now deciding in godly sorrow that you're going to turn away from the life

you've lived? Would you be ready to confess your faith in Christ, just as the eunuch in **Acts 8** who wanted to be saved? Then today, would you arise and be baptized into Christ to have your sins washed away, as Saul and so many others did so long ago?

By His grace and through your faith that I just described, He will save you, He will wash you, and He will add you to His church—the one He established 2000 years ago before the many changes and innovations of men corrupted it. I hope you'll let us assist you in doing that this very day.

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