



Bible Student's Notebook™

The Herald of His Grace

Presenting *every man* perfect in Christ Jesus. Colossians 1:28

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Paul and Water Baptism

by – Denis Durham (Decatur, IL)

As a believer in Christ for over 30 years, I have come to rejoice in many truths from the Word of God. However, I have had to change my beliefs about many scriptural issues. I believe this is a necessary process in the growth of believers. I have come to appreciate the fellowship of those who have different views than I. How can we ever grow if our beliefs are not challenged? I don't feel threatened by those who question my beliefs; I welcome it. If I can learn that I am wrong about a particular belief, it can only strengthen my Christian walk.



Unfortunately, I don't think this is a common attitude among members of the Body of Christ. Denominational tradition can be very strong. It can be very exclusive, and even cruel at times towards other believers in Christ. It is this attitude that I wish to avoid.

When discussing the issue of water baptism, the denominational mindset can be felt very keenly. The topic of baptism is one of the most divisive issues within the Body of Christ. Membership in a particular "church" is often denied to those who are not water baptized in the "proper" way. I find this interesting, especially since church membership is a religious tradition and not a scriptural concept. The only church membership I am aware of is the one to which you are joined at salvation. All others are man-made.

What follows is my discussion concerning what I believe about the purpose of water baptism as it was practiced in the time of the apostles, and why it has no place today in the dispensation of grace.

WATER BAPTISM: A JEWISH RITE

Water baptism was a religious rite intended to induct Jewish believers into the messianic priesthood. One of the goals of the messianic kingdom was to make the na-

tion of Israel a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6). Throughout the Old Testament, the tribe of Levi (the sons of Aaron), was chosen to be priests. However, in the future kingdom, the promise is given to make the whole nation of Israel priests to the Lord (Revelation 1:6). One of the requirements to be a priest in the Old Testament was to be washed with water (Leviticus 8:6). When John the Baptist came baptizing, this was nothing new. The Jews knew the significance of what he was doing.

It is interesting to note what the Jews did when they were baptized. In Matthew 3:6 it says they were baptized by John, "confessing their sins." I have never heard anyone who has been water baptized give this reason for their baptism. I have heard them say that they were baptized as an outward sign of an inward belief. However, there is no Scripture that I know of that gives this as the basis for water baptism.

Confession of sins is the scriptural reason given for why the Jews were baptized in water. This confession of sins was not personal as one would suppose. They did not begin to list all of their sins to John as he was baptizing them. Rather, it was a *national* confession. The nation of Israel was in apostasy at the time. They had been given over to the rule of the Gentiles ever since the Babylonian captivity. So when they came to get baptized, they were confessing as a nation their apostate condition and their need for the Messiah.

The purpose John gives as to the reason he was baptizing is given in John 1:31.

And I knew Him not: but that He should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water.

(see **BAPTISM**, page 2807)

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- the proclamation of the riches of God's abundant, exceeding grace (Romans 5:20; 11:6; Ephesians 1:7);
- the affirmation of God's purpose to save all mankind through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (I Timothy 2:3, 4; 4:10; Titus 2:11);
- the "preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began" (Romans 16:25);
- true freedom and liberty apart from law (Galatians 5:1);
- the organic nature of the church, the Body of Christ (I Corinthians 12);
- the distinct message and ministry of Paul, the apostle to the nations (Romans 11:13);
- the importance of receiving all whom Christ has received (Romans 14-15);
- the recovery of rich Biblical truth that has too long remained hidden under the veils of traditionalism, prejudice, misunderstanding, and fear (Mark 7:7, 13);
- the completeness of the believer in Christ (Colossians 2:10), with:
 - total freedom from sins (Colossians 1:14);
 - identity in His death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6);
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BAPTISM (continued from front page)

One of John's responsibilities was to make known to Israel the coming of their Messiah. Obviously, this manifestation has been fulfilled. There is no longer a need to prepare for the coming of the Messiah in this way. Also, we, as believers today, Jew or Gentile, have no need to confess a broken national covenant as Israel did.

John the Baptist's message concerned the coming of the kingdom to Israel as was promised by the prophets. It was in this context that water baptism was given as a visible sign of repentance and preparation for the messianic kingdom.

Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand
(Matthew 3:2).

The way the Jews repented was to be water baptized – something the religious leaders refused to do, seeing no need to repent for their apostate condition and not discerning that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

One of the arguments given for being water baptized is because Jesus was baptized. Yet this argument doesn't stand up when one realizes that Jesus was also circumcised, and I know no one today who insists on circumcision as a religious requirement. In fact, there are many things commanded within the gospel account as given in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John that no believer obeys today. As an example, Jesus told the leper he had healed in Matthew 8:4 to go and offer to the priest what Moses commanded. At the time, the Mosaic law was still in effect. They were under the Old Covenant. Hebrews 9:16-17 shows that in order for the New Testament to be effective, Christ had to die first. Therefore, the earthly ministry of Christ was under the Old Covenant, as can be seen throughout His ministry.

WATER BAPTISM & PENTECOST

There are many Christians who understand that the earthly ministry of Christ was still part of the Old Testament covenant. This is why they start the Body of Christ in Acts 2, on the Day of Pentecost. They believe that something completely new began at this time. It is interesting to note, however, that quite the opposite is implied in Acts 2:16-17.

But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; "And it shall come to pass in the last days," saith God, "I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh."

As is indicated in this verse, the events here are the result of that which was prophesied as part of the Jewish mes-

siatic kingdom. Notice that it says "last days." Whatever took place here was not the BEGINNING of anything, but rather the END. It was bringing to conclusion what was part of the covenant given to Israel, and does not concern the Body of Christ as was later revealed through Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles.

To begin the Body of Christ in Acts 2 is strange, indeed, when one considers all of the events that took place. It is a terrible passage to use as the standard of the Christian experience. One of the most prominent features is the gift of tongues, a gift that many of those who believe in water baptism do not practice. Also, one of the things that characterized this Pentecostal gathering was the selling of one's earthly possessions.

*And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And **sold their possessions and goods, and parted them** to all men, as every man had need (Acts 2:44-45).*

I know of no believer today who does this. Why would we use this passage to pinpoint the *beginning* of the Body of Christ, when it in no way resembles the Christian life today? In fact, I know of no one who even attempts to do this. I would argue that, if a believer sold all of his possessions, he would be disobedient to God's instructions for us today. Rather than trying to make it fit into the present dispensation of grace, we should realize that the events taking place in Acts 2 were in preparation for the messianic kingdom. We know from Paul's writings that this kingdom purpose has been delayed until the fullness of the present dispensation has been completed.

Now, concerning the practice of the water rite, the same message is given here as in the gospel account. Water baptism was a requirement for salvation.

Then Peter said unto them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."

It is quite clear that, in order to receive the remission of sins at that time, water baptism was required. This in no way is contrary to other old covenant verses. Consider Mark 16:16.

He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.

The verse does not say to repent, believe and then get baptized as an outside sign of your faith. It clearly says to ►

get baptized as part of the salvation message. This was the gospel at the time.

Notice also that the gospel which we preach in the Dispensation of Grace was not given in Acts 2. Is it not true that, today, we preach that trusting in the death and resurrection of Christ is the gospel of our salvation? We preach the crucifixion of Christ as *good news*. In Acts 2 the cross was preached as *bad news* to be repented of – but this is not the message we teach today.

The Jews were to repent of their apostate condition and their cruel treatment of the Lord at Calvary. As a result, they were to repent and to submit to a ceremonial washing of water baptism in accordance with the *covenant*, in order to make them a *kingdom of priests* and to usher in the long prophesied kingdom to Israel. This in no way resembles the pure grace of God as revealed to Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles. We do not need to repent of our national apostate condition because we are not in a covenant relationship with God as a nation. Nor do we need to submit to a water rite in order to be identified as priests. All of the religious rites were shadows of greater truths. Jesus Christ has removed all such ceremonial pictures and has replaced them with the pure, unadulterated message of grace today. It was for this reason that the apostle Paul was saved and given a new message concerning the full accomplishments of the cross.

THE MINISTRY OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

When I talk to people about the truths from the Word of God, I like to ask them an important two-part question:

- (1) Why was it necessary for the Lord to save Paul and send him forth to the Gentiles?

According to the so called “Great Commission,” the twelve apostles were given the responsibility of going to the entire world. Why would God save one man to send him to the world when he already had twelve to do the job?

Furthermore,

- (2) Why would the twelve apostles limit their ministry to the Jews and transfer to Paul the ministry of going to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:9)?

I believe the answer to these questions can be found by applying II Timothy 2:15 to our Bible study.

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth.

Rightly dividing God’s Word has the ability of clearing up much confusion. I believe this God-ordained dividing line can be found by understanding the unique message given to the apostle Paul. People commonly put the dividing line between the book of Malachi and Matthew, erroneously calling the book of Matthew the *New Testament*. This is a man-made division. As was stated earlier, the book of Matthew cannot be the beginning of the New Testament. Rather, Matthew continues the prophetic message, including the religious ordinances. It was not until the ministry of the apostle Paul that you have a complete change in the message.

There are many things about Paul’s apostleship that are strange if you try to understand them according to the typical Acts 2 position. In fact, the whole existence of Paul’s ministry is an enigma. For one, why would Paul learn about God’s purpose directly from the risen Lord instead of from the twelve apostles, unless there was a different message given to him?

To reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus (Galatians 1:16-17).

Furthermore, Paul actually taught the twelve some things they did not know.

But of these who seemed to be somewhat, (whatsoever they were, it maketh no matter to me: God accepteth no man’s person:) for they who seemed to be somewhat in conference added nothing to me: but contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as the gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter; (for He that wrought effectually in Peter to the apostleship of the circumcision, the Same was mighty in me toward the Gentiles:) and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision (Galatians 2:6-9).

If Peter and Paul preached the same message, what could Paul possibly have taught Peter and the other apostles? It was the Twelve apostles who spent three years with Christ Himself, and then had the experience at Pentecost with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. To the Twelve were given the commission to reach the whole world with the gospel. What could Paul have taught them?

In reality, Paul taught them the pure grace of God apart from rites, rituals, ordinances, etc. Paul was the first to whom the gospel apart from works was revealed. Consider I Timothy 1:16.

Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on Him to life everlasting.

If Paul was the *first*, there were none before him who preached this message. Otherwise, the word “*first*” loses any significance.

There's something else strange about Paul's preaching. Why would he call what he preached “*my gospel*” (Romans 2:16; 16:25; II Timothy 2:8)? Was it really Paul's gospel? Peter never referred to the gospel in this way. Why is Paul the only one to speak this way?

Obviously, the gospel that Paul preached was unique. Galatians 2:7 makes it clear that Peter and Paul preached different gospels. Paul refers to what he preached as the “*gospel of the uncircumcision,*” and he called the message that Peter preached the “*gospel of the circumcision.*”

Why would the message that Peter preached be called the “*gospel of the circumcision,*” when in fact the Lord had commissioned him to go to all of the world? The answer can be found in Galatians 2:9.

And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision.

These verses are difficult to understand if one believes that the so-called “Great Commission” continued uninterrupted. A *great* change took place with Paul's ministry. His message is *not* just some added information to what the Jewish believers preached. If that was the case, any one of the Twelve apostles could have penned additional information. That was *not* the case with Paul. He had a distinct message not previously known. Ephesians 3 explains why Paul was given a ministry. However, since this study is on water baptism, I will not go into more detail about Ephesians 3. I will leave it to the reader to study this passage.

ROMANS 6

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 (Romans 6:3-4).

It seems quite clear that Romans 6:3-4 is dealing with a baptism that is completely divine with no human intermediary. The passage states that believers have been “*baptized into Jesus Christ.*” If this is water baptism, then it teaches baptismal regeneration. In other words, water baptism places you in Christ if this is true.

Notice that the verse tells us “*into*” what we are baptized, and it's not water. There are two things in :3-4 into which we are baptized: *Jesus Christ*, and *His death*. Only the Spirit can do such a thing as stated in I Corinthians 12:13.

For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.

By the way, it's interesting that the word “*drink*” is used here. Therefore, there must be a reference to water here, but obviously it can't be literal water. Ephesians 5:26 speaks of a “*washing of water by the Word.*” The point is that the Spirit's operation has replaced the *symbol* of water baptism. Why would we need the *shadow* when we have the *substance*?

Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body [substance]¹ is of Christ (Colossians 2:17).

COLOSSIANS 2:11-12

Colossians 2:11-12 is a beautiful passage that deals with our completeness in Christ. These verses parallel Romans 6. Notice the reference in Colossians 2:12 to our baptism again. In Romans 6, mention is made of the death and resurrection of Christ and our identification with Him. In Colossians 2:12, mention is made of our identification with Christ in His burial. Notice that there are two issues addressed in this passage: circumcision, and baptism. Also, notice how both of these things are done by God, *not* man.

1. “*substance belongs to Christ*” (Weymouth).
“*substance belongs to Christ*” (Moffatt).
“*reality belongs to Christ*” (Williams).
[Editor]

In Whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: 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 (Colossians 2:11-12).

As can be seen from the above passage, circumcision is done by the Lord without the need for the hand of man. Also, notice that the baptism here is done by an operation of God. Both the burial and resurrection of Christ is said to be of God and not man. It seems clear that the word "wherein" in :12 is referring to the baptism just stated. So the spiritual baptism here identifies us with Christ's burial and resurrection. It would seem forced, indeed, to try to make the baptism here a physical one. All is of God here without the need for an intermediary.

EPHESIANS 4:4-6

There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, Who is above all, and through all, and in you all (Ephesians 4:4-6).

The baptism referred to in this passage is taught to mean either water baptism or spirit baptism. I would like to deal with the former first.

Many teach that the one baptism is a literal, physical immersion of a believer into water. Doesn't this seem strange when one considers that everything else in the passage is spiritual? Why would six of the unities be spiritual, but only one be physical? Wouldn't it make sense that this baptism here would be the same one referred to by the apostle Paul in the rest his writings? Why would Paul say that there is only one baptism, and then when speaking of baptism in his other writings refer to another one? I submit to you that Paul, when dealing with our identification in Christ, always refers to the *spirit* baptism that one receives at salvation.

The point of this Ephesians passage is to show our unity as believers in Christ, and to beseech us to keep that unity. All true believers have this unity at salvation apart from any activity of man. We are to strive to make this unity the issue in our relationships with other believers. In other words, we are to rally around the fact of our oneness, not in our understanding of various doctrines. If the one baptism is with water, how can we possibly have unity? Water baptism is practiced in so many ways, with

many excluding membership in their "church" if the baptism is not done according to their understanding. By the way, I find it interesting that the Lord gives me membership into His church, but I'm denied membership in their "church" because I have not been baptized in their prescribed method.

All of this is religious activity and does not represent true unity. If our unity is to be around water baptism, what about believers who have never been baptized in water? I have been a believer for over 30 years, but I have never been water baptized. If Paul commands believers to strive to keep the unity of the Spirit, it would be impossible to observe towards believers who have never submitted to the water rite.

If water baptism is part of the doctrine to be obeyed today, why is there no command to be baptized in any of Paul's epistles (Romans – Philemon)? The epistles were written to lay down the doctrine for the church, and yet there is not *one* command to submit to this rite. Why wouldn't Paul have instructed Timothy or Titus about this matter when giving them instructions for leading the local assemblies? Surely something would have been said. Why are there no instructions for building baptisteries? Also, why wouldn't Paul or the other writers of the epistles give instructions regarding the mode of baptism? If this is so important, surely they would have been careful to give guidance on this issue. Why would the Lord leave such an important subject up to *inference* from the historical records? Are we supposed to read the historical books (Matthew – Acts) and come up with a doctrine of water baptism by trying to decipher the mode of baptism they used? I don't believe so.

I believe Paul's epistles were written to lay down the necessary doctrine without the need to infer them. Now, I do believe we can gain doctrinal understanding from the historical books, but we do not need to rely on them for the most basic of doctrines, one of which is baptism.

In the present dispensation of grace there is only one baptism operative – all others are done away. Those who say that there are two or more baptisms are causing division.

I CORINTHIANS 1:17

There are a number of unique things about the apostle Paul's ministry, one of which is his acknowledgement that the commission given to him did *not* include water baptism. Now, some take this to mean that Paul was not sent *primarily* to baptize. The verse in question, however, does not support this view. Even if this was true, he still

could not have been operating under the commission that Christ gave to the twelve apostles, because water baptism was indeed a *primary* part of their commission. Contrast the commission given to John the Baptist:

And I knew Him not: but He that sent me to baptize with water ... (John 1:33).

Now look at Paul's commission:

*For Christ sent me **NOT to baptize**, but to preach the gospel (I Corinthians 1:17).*

Why in the world would Paul say such a thing? Can you imagine any of the other apostles making such a statement?

Many will refer to I Corinthians 1:15 to say that the reason Paul did not baptize is because he did not want others to focus on him. Why didn't the other apostles have a problem baptizing then? Regardless, even if :15 is simply teaching that Paul did not want fellow believers to exalt him, you can't deny what is said in :17 which makes it clear that Paul's commission did not include water baptism, and neither did the gospel that he preached contain the doctrine of water baptism.

Some will say that Paul had other people baptize for him like Christ did. However, you would have to believe this based on a lack of evidence, not on any references in Scripture.

Some will argue that since Paul did baptize, we should do the same. However, are we going to circumcise as a religious commandment just because Paul did? While Acts 16 shows that Paul circumcised Timothy, it's not a good idea to base doctrine on the historical books – as I stated earlier.

As an example, the book of Acts is a transitional book chronicling the change of program from the Jewish Kingdom to God's purpose among the Gentiles through Paul's ministry. Even Peter had to change his understanding. In early Acts, Peter had a good understanding of what God was doing at the time. After Paul's conversion in Acts 9, Peter had to learn some new things. In fact, Paul was the one from whom Peter learned (see Galatians 1).

The gift of Tongues is also a good example to show that we should not base our doctrine on the historical books. Tongues can be seen as an active gift in early Acts. Even Paul engaged in the practice. We now know through the teaching of the epistles that this gift is no longer neces-

sary. The gift of healing also is another example of something that was practiced at one time, but is not part of the current commission as imparted to the apostle Paul.

CONCLUSION

It's unfortunate that many times believers cannot discuss doctrinal disagreements without making unnecessary accusations. While writing this, I have consulted writings by people on both sides of the water baptism issue. Unfortunately, *both* sides are guilty of questioning the others' motive. Those who teach that we should practice water baptism will say of the "ultra-dispensationalists" that they are trying to find an excuse for not obeying God's command. This of course is nonsense. On the other hand, those of us who teach that water baptism should not be practiced today will say that the "Baptists" refuse to believe the Word of God, or that they would rather hold on to their tradition. I know believers who hold to water baptism, but it's because they have never heard any other teaching. Others simply do not understand the biblical passages the same way I do, and it's not because they are denying the Word of God. My point is not to say that our motives are always pure, but that we don't have a right to judge their motives. As Paul says,

Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand. One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind (Romans 14:4-5).

There has been so much needless division within the Body of Christ. We will never agree on all points of doctrine until we're in glory. Let's focus on our oneness in Christ and love one another as the Lord intended. ■

[Editor:] For those desiring further reading on the subject of *baptism*, here are a few valuable resources:

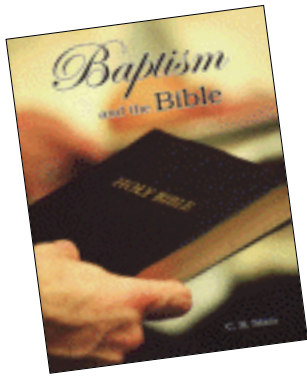
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Books (from StudyShelf.com/baptism)

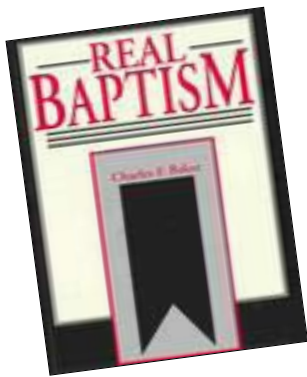


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