

The Baptism Which Jesus Accepts

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them ...
teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.”
(Matthew 28:19,20)

David Caudery

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This was the final commission of Jesus to his disciples according to the Gospel of Matthew. How wonderfully his command was followed by that first generation of enthusiastic believers. The *Acts of the Apostles* is very stirring. Men and women in many countries turned from idols to serve and worship the one true God. The Jewish leaders and people scattered throughout the Roman Empire heard the message, they agonized over whether Jesus was the Messiah or not. But both Gentiles and Jews went down into the waters of baptism in great numbers and emerged as sons and daughters of the living God. Their sins were washed away, the sacrifice Jesus made was for them, for all. They now had a clearly defined hope. They had a conviction that they would rise from the dead as Jesus had done – but that would be at his coming (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). They searched the scriptures to learn more about the Kingdom of God and the coming reign of Christ on earth (Acts 17:11). Their lives were built on a oneness of belief, of hope, of faith and of baptism. They believed in one God and one Lord and saw themselves as “one body.” (Ephesians 4:3-6)

The first century vision faded with succeeding generations. Now we see a mass of churches often competing and striving with each other. Beliefs, rituals and practices have developed in a great variety of ways. Confusion seems to reign. Thankfully there is still one Bible, the accepted word of God. The believers had been “the body of Christ” – but where is that body now?

In the pages which follow we aim to briefly survey - the history of the attitudes of the churches to baptism – the relationship of belief to baptism – the issues of re-baptism – that baptism is in a sense marriage to Christ – it is the start of a relationship with Christ – it is therefore vital to know the truth about Christ – Paul wrote of one hope, one faith, one baptism – the mode and meaning of baptism – and – the need to count the cost of baptism and following Christ before you enter the “narrow gate” which alone leads to life.

Christianity through the Ages

At the head of the procession is the Roman Catholic Church. They see themselves as the successors of Peter, claiming he is the rock on which the church, which they consider to be the only true church, is founded. They now practice sprinkling or trickling a little water on the heads of babies, saying this is baptism. Then there is the large Eastern Orthodox mass of churches. Very largely they practice immersion as the Greek language can only have that meaning for the word *baptizo*. But they too baptise the very young.

In the 4th and 5th Centuries when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, countless numbers were pressured into conversion and obliged to be baptized – and their baptism was immersion in water.

In the Middle Ages printing was invented and usually the Bible was the first large book published in each language. Suddenly people could read the sacred record for themselves. The official churches desperately tried to stem the tide of independent thinking. One particular practice they strongly deplored was that of “re-baptism.” This was a denial of Church practice, this was a declaration that their Church “baptism” had not been valid. The church saw this as an insult to them and much trouble followed including martyrdom. Many of these believers were known as *Anabaptists* and *Brethren*. These were forerunners of *Christ’s Brethren*, which is the meaning of *Christadelphian*, the name they have been known by for the past 150 years.

Modern Christianity and Baptism

Today in the 21st Century the turmoil of the Middle Ages is long past, but there exists an even more remarkable mixture of churches, denominations and sects. Baptism is still practiced here and there, but many, such as the Baptist Church, that originally came into existence to proclaim baptism as essential, have changed their thinking. In many areas this church no longer insists in their members being baptized. They no longer believe that it is essential.

The practice, in the mainstream churches, of sprinkling infants with water – called Christening – is the more common mode and has been for the last 500 years. Those that still practice immersion can sometimes perform the rite on infants and young children. But others require a measure of maturity, expecting the one being baptized to demonstrate they are making a responsible decision. But even here there are many variations. *Is the decision based on a simple declaration that Jesus is my Lord – that he died for me? Or is it something more?*

Our key question

The purpose of this publication is to investigate and answer the above questions? Our key question is - *What is the baptism which Jesus accepts?* Surely this is the most fundamental question that everyone seeking to be a true child of God has to ask themselves – and seek for answers.

It is common sense that the many different practices that have developed since the first century cannot all be right. The first century holds the clue. Here we find all the evidence of the original teachings and practice. Are there any grounds to justify varying them?

To talk of re-baptism is misleading. There is only one true baptism and surely that must mirror the practices of the first followers of Jesus. Either you are baptized or you are not. Many who believe themselves to be baptized must face up to the question as to whether what happened to them was valid in the sight of God; was their baptism after the same pattern as in the first century?

With those who were christened, the answer is plain. The first century knows nothing of christening. It was not a practice instituted by Jesus or his followers; hundreds of years passed before there is any reference to the practice being introduced into the Church. A baby cannot believe, it cannot say, “What must I do to be saved?”

Baptism and belief

We repeat our key question, *What makes baptism valid in the sight of God, that is, a baptism which is acceptable to Jesus?* There is the succinct statement in Mark 16:16 “He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned.” Although there is a question about the text, this statement bluntly sums up the Apostles teaching and is parallel to the quotation from Matthew at the head of this publication. The call to be baptized and be saved is repeated again and again in the text of Acts, and many responded to the call. (Acts 2:37-38; 8:12, 13, 36-38; 16:30-31; 19:4-5) It is a call following a declaration of belief.

It must be remembered that most of these converts were Jews who already knew the Law and the prophets and who believed in one God. Once they were convinced that Jesus was the promised Messiah, they showed no hesitation. And how were they convinced? By a more detailed study of Scripture, which we call the Old Testament. And how are we convinced?

We are convinced in the same way. As Paul wrote to Timothy, “the holy scriptures which are able to make you wise unto salvation.” (2 Timothy 3: 15) When Paul preached at Berea he had a receptive audience who “received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.” (Acts 17:11) The scriptures show that “the gospel of Christ ... is the power of God unto salvation” (Romans 1:16) The Old Testament is the foundation of the message Christ brought, look how many times he quoted from those Scriptures.

How do we accept Christ?

These facts illustrate that accepting Christ is not just a simple matter of declaring him to be your Saviour, or of your parents having you “baptized” as a baby or young child, even if that was by full immersion. Rather it is the confession of full faith in all that he is, that he stands for, and that he taught.

By baptism we become “married” to Christ, he is our bridegroom. No one normally enters the married state without careful thought and much planning. And the marriages of those who do otherwise rarely last! But now comes the key question; how does Christ identify his true and faithful bride? Remember, a bride must be properly “adorned for her husband.” (Revelation 21:2; Isaiah 61:10)

How does Christ accept us – his bride?

We can see how the religious leaders of Christ’s day thought they were true and faithful to their God and their law. Jesus showed them how blind they were. How they hated him for this! How they shut their eyes to the home-truths he told them, with many quotations from their sacred scriptures. (Mark 7:5-7; 11:17-18; 12:10-12; 28-37) With the mass of different churches down through the ages, varying the teaching of Jesus in so many ways, how cannot there but be a similar confrontation when Jesus comes again with those who believe the bridegroom is coming to claim them as his bride. (Matthew 7:21-23)

It seems self evident that it will only be those who have been faithful down through the ages to the original message and practice, that the returning Christ will claim as His bride. Paul was at pains to stress to the believers at Ephesus that there is only “one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above you all” (Ephesians 4:4-6).

This is surely “one” in the sense of singleness and unity. The 3 preceding verses are all about keeping unity among the believers. Just as the household of believers should be of one mind, so all other spiritual factors involved are “one”. In particular we must note that there is “one hope” and that is certainly not a hope of some part of us, most call it the soul, going to heaven immediately we die to exist in some disembodied way. This is delusion without a single verse in the Bible to support it. Rather it is the hope of resurrection and of the kingdom to be established on earth, God’s kingdom, ruled by Christ. The one faith must be founded on a true hope, otherwise it is not a true faith.

Knowing the truth about Jesus

There is one Lord – Jesus the Christ. If any change the picture of what Christ really was, both “son of man” and “son of God” – they are no longer preaching the same Jesus. Already this was starting to happen in some places. “I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds shall be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached ... you may well put up with it.” (2 Corinthians 11:3,4)

The lie that was told in the garden of Eden has been repeated in various guises ever since. Some act as though “truth” is only made to be bent or distorted, but that is the way human nature works. In is the result of not really knowing and being in awe of God. This was the problem of the religious leaders who confronted Jesus. To them it was a power struggle, as to who should exercise authority. They challenged him, “By what authority are you doing these things?” (Matthew 21:23) They refused to “accept” the utter marvel of his miracles and focused their minds on their own position and standing. This was the absolutely vital thing in their lives. (John 11:48) We have to stand back and take stock of what is absolutely vital in our lives, but do we?

An all supreme Father

Reflect back again on the passage quoted from Ephesians 4. “One God and Father of all who is above all.” That echoes all that Jesus says about the Father. Totally supreme. That is why Jesus spent all night in prayer to His Father and said so many things about His Father. He came to reveal his Father to the world, because no one had seen or can see God at any time. (1 Timothy 6:16) Of course the fact that “God is One” had always been Jewish belief, but for the Gentile converts it was not, and Acts shows how the converts at Ephesus had been worshippers of Diana or Artemis and many other idol deities. (Acts 19:27; 17:16) The message of Christ and his followers is the same, yet it is given a different emphasis according the background of the hearers, whether they are Gentiles as at Athens, or Jews as at Antioch.

The message of “one baptism”

Yet whether Jews or Gentiles, the message of “one baptism” was always the same. Cornelius, a Centurion, was the first Gentile convert. The events astonished Peter, yet he was the first to declare that they should be baptized. “Can anyone forbid water,” said Peter (Acts 10:47-48). And dare we forbid water, and say it is unnecessary? We dare not. Yet, tragically some do.

The question before us however, is to properly understand baptism as administered in New Testament times. Peter made the point in his epistle that baptism is not the removal of filth from the body, instead it is “the answer (or response) of a good conscience toward God.” (1 Peter 3:21) In a type, he says Noah and his family were baptized by the flood, and so were saved. (1 Peter 3:20) And now it is the blood of Christ which saves us when we believe and are baptized. (Mark 16:16) So understanding and believing create a “conscience” about our position before God leading us to want to put ourselves in a *right* position before God.

As we look at the different parts of this subject the essential nature and method of baptism is becoming clearer. When Jesus sent his disciples forth, in his final command before he ascended to heaven, he sent them to baptise and to teach the converts “to observe all things that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:20) These are the essentials of marriage to Christ. The baptism that Christ accepts then, is that in which such things are recognized. As the message became watered down and its “simplicity” was changed – men started preaching a different Christ and a different Gospel. (2 Corinthians 11:4) Yet Paul is very blunt in saying there is no other Gospel. Look at what he writes to the Galatians.

One Gospel leads to “one baptism”

“I marvel that you are turning away so soon from him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.” (Galatians 1:6-8) Paul repeats himself in the next

verse to emphasize the point. Even if Paul himself, which he thought impossible, were to try change the message he would be accursed. Or an angel from heaven, even more impossible!!

There is one gospel, and that gospel was first preached to Abraham, Paul says in the third chapter (Galatians 3:8). Yet how many churches will tell you that? Many do not know the fullness of the Gospel. Paul says, that is a “different gospel” Yet there is “not another” gospel – there is only one. In the same way, with “one baptism” – there cannot be another form of baptism based on a different hope and a different faith. This fact should create sober reflection in the minds of all those who think they have been baptised as to whether it was a baptism in “truth” – a baptism which Jesus recognizes and accepts.

Paul in Romans 6 spells out the vital meaning and significance of the mode of baptism. All those contemplating baptism should very carefully read this chapter, meditating on each verse. The only baptism known in the Bible is that which involves going down into the water, being covered with water, and rising to a new life in Christ. This is a symbol of Christ dying for sinners, going into the grave and rising to a new life. The going down into the water also symbolizes the death of the old way of living, the old Adam or Eve is put behind us. (1 Corinthians 15:21,22) We become “alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:11)

“He cannot be my disciple”

All who contemplate following Christ should meditate on Christ’s own words about the “cost” of discipleship. These are blunt and challenging. In effect they set out the terms of marriage to Christ, the commitment we make at baptism. The passage that demands our study is Luke 14:25-33.

The passage builds up to a climax in the last verse, “so likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be my disciple.” To be baptized and become a disciple involves total commitment. Everything else must take second place. Parents, brothers and sisters, children and even your wife or husband (Luke 14:26) all have to take second place. You must love the Lord so much that other affections seem like “hate” by comparison.

Notice in particular the example given in this passage of erecting a building. Jesus says, “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it – lest, after he has laid the foundation, all who see begin to mock him.” (Luke 14:28,29) There are few things that are more regretful than the way non believers mock at Christians who fail, who fall from the narrow way. Thankfully there are some who climb back up again, grievously sorry, but wiser. King David was the greatest example of such a one. His sins discredited him, his authority as king was undermined.

Are you building? What is your foundation?

The Apostle Paul describes himself as “a wise master builder” (1 Corinthians 3:10) He goes on to say, “for no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 3:11) When we are baptized we commence building. It is evident that not all baptisms are seen in this way. Certainly babies do not know how to start building.

It is also evident that the foundation, Jesus Christ, is not seen in the same way. The way revealed in the Scriptures is that the new believer develops a relationship with Christ. The Scripture tells him that Jesus is his mediator (1 Timothy 2:5), his High Priest (Hebrews 3:1; 4:14-16), that Jesus was tempted in all points like us that he might understand and help us in our temptations. (Hebrews 2:17; 4:15)

A different Saviour?

But some have imagined a very different Christ, one who is God incarnate, was not begotten, because he always existed. One who could not be tempted, because it is not possible for God to be tempted (but see James 1:13), he is not able to properly help us in our temptations. (but see Hebrews 2:18) But all this is human thinking and reasoning, God's holy word does not say this at all.

But the situation is even more critical than this. God is immortal (1 Timothy 6:16) and the angels as part of God's hosts are also immortal (Luke 20:36). So if it is true that Jesus is God, an equal immortal being with the Almighty, as most churches teach in one form of words or another, it is evident that He did not really die for our sins. The churches have always recognized this problem and the standard answer is that his body died, but not his spirit or soul. But every careful Bible student knows that such an answer has no support in the Bible. The original word for soul fundamentally means life, being or person. In the older versions of the Bible the word soul occurred a lot, but modern versions often use life, person, being or similar. Examples are Acts 2:43, Romans 13:1; 2 Peter 2:8, etc.

The word spirit has the basic meaning of breath or wind. So when Jesus gave up his spirit it simply means he ceased breathing. (see Luke 23:46) His whole being went into the tomb and Peter says (Acts 2:27,31) that his soul was not left in the tomb, but after 3 days he was raised to life again.

This is the Jesus of the Scripture, the one who invites you to be baptized and take on his name. He was made "son of man" for the "suffering of death" (Hebrews 2:9), but, because he was "obedient unto death" (Philippians 2:8) he was raised to glory to die no more. But he did really die, for your sins and mine, a sacrificial lamb for all those who need a Saviour – and who know that their Saviour expects them to be baptized to show that they know he died for them. (Colossians 2:9)

But what of those who see the person of Christ quite differently to what we have just stated and shown from scripture? What is their situation before Christ? The Master bluntly said, "The word that I have spoken will judge him at the last day" (John 12:48) How will our beliefs and actions measure up to the revealed word of God and his Son as stated in the Bible? Jesus bluntly told the Sadducees they were wrong in denying belief in the resurrection, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God." (Matthew 22:29) Surely it is better to learn if we are wrong – now – and correct our beliefs – than when the "word" is held up in judgment against us on that day. Then it will be too late. But there is no evidence the Sadducees changed their belief – and sadly, too many today hold on to human thinking when the mistakes in their understanding are pointed out to them.

Let us now briefly review what we have discovered in this study.

1. All converts named in the Bible were adults who expressed belief before they were baptized by immersion under water.
2. In later Centuries there was confusion of belief as churches multiplied.
3. Christening was practiced much later. The Bible knows nothing of such a practice.
4. Christening is sometimes wrongly called baptism.
5. In the Middle Ages, those who disagreed with Christening were usually re-baptized as adults

6. To talk of re-baptism is misleading. There can be only one true baptism.
7. There is total confusion of belief and practice today.
8. We need to get back to the Bible, it's the only source of true knowledge of belief and practice.
9. Belief, "the answer of a good conscience" comes first and leads to baptism.
10. Baptism should be seen as a marriage ceremony with Christ as the bridegroom.
11. Christ seeks a true and faithful bride. That is why we cannot accept anything other than Bible truth.
12. The religious leaders of Christ's day were rejected, their weakness was that they were obsessed with getting power and authority.
13. There is one hope, one faith, one baptism.
14. The one hope is the kingdom on earth, not in heaven. This created the basis for "one faith".
15. Believers were to be taught to observe all things that Christ had commanded.
16. Paul warned that some would preach another Jesus.
17. Baptism into another Jesus or another Gospel is not baptism at all.
18. We must count the cost before being baptized.
19. We must aim to build a relationship with Christ, but cannot do that if we misunderstand what he is and think he is God.
20. Baptism identifies us with the death of Christ, by it we acknowledge he died for us. Therefore we must believe he really died, body and soul.

Personal Postscript

As the writer of the foregoing I would like to add this personal footnote. I have known more than a few who have come to acknowledge that they have misunderstood Bible teaching about Christ and his relationship with God, of heaven and hell and of sin and the devil. Yet I have seen them stand at the crossroads of a decision as to what change this knowledge should have on their lives. Some have stood there so long it has virtually become a permanent position.

I can understand the dilemma and most of the issues they wrestle with. Yet one point in particular I wish to stress is that it is not the actual correct knowledge and understanding of truth itself that is so important as the wonder of the relationship to which it leads. That is what transforms our lives and saves us.

It is a relationship with God and His Son that grows and grows. One cannot stress enough that if you misunderstand the nature of Jesus and think of him as God instead of his position as your personal mediator, High Priest and future king, your relationship is unreal. It cannot grow and, in part at least, it is a mirage.

Yet standing at the crossroads can be lonely, you are neither in one place or the other. The considerations that fill ones mind are often later seen to be unworthy of the delay they caused. Concerns about the loss of opportunities. Concerns about justifying the step to family and friends. Concerns about the smallness of the group you are about to associate with. But each man or woman must, writes the Apostle Paul, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.” [Philippians 2:12-13]

Our relationship with our God and our Saviour is a personal matter – everything else falls into place later. But first must come the true baptism after the New Testament example, for that is the baptism which Christ accepts.

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