

Living Light Christian Church

Vision & Commitment Course Addendum “Water Baptism Within the Context of Church History”

In order for us to understand how the practice of water baptism has become so confused, we must see it within the context of Church history.

For the first two hundred years of Church history (during what was known as the Apostolic Age 30-100 A.D. and the Ante-Nicene Age 100-325 A.D.¹), water baptism was practiced in the way we have described in these notes with little variance or debate, that is, for believers only and by full immersion. The earliest known extra-biblical teaching and discipleship manual produced by the Church around 100 A.D. was called the *Didache*. It clearly taught that baptism was for believers only and gave no indication that the practice of baptizing infants was part of the life of the Church.

Over the next 150 years, the leaders of the Church were attempting to develop a methodology of Church life and ministry in the absence of a clear New Testament canon. Being highly influenced by Old Testament patterns of priesthood and circumcision, a new approach to baptism began to emerge which viewed it as the Christian equivalent of circumcision. The practice of baptizing infants began to gain some prominence in the time of Irenaeus (130-202 A.D.) and Origen (185-254 A.D.), and it is in their writings that we find the first clear endorsement by a Church leader of infant baptism. Even then, it would take until the Council of Carthage in 253 A.D. before the practice was recognized as common or legitimate.

Despite this development, the Church over this time period remained similar in many ways to what we see in the New Testament. The Church was primarily made up of radical converts who would have had no motive for belonging to the Church other than an authentic conversion, since becoming a Christian would typically mean extreme persecution, even martyrdom. To the Roman-dominated culture of the time, Christians, if recognized at all, would have been seen as a grouping within Judaism. However within Judaism, they were rejected as an unorthodox, renegade cult and were completely removed from synagogue life around 70 A.D. In terms of respectability and social standing, one didn't get much lower than being a Christian over this period. However, at the turn of the fourth century, this was all about to change.

¹ The Ante-Nicene Period (literally meaning "before Nicaea"), or Post-Apostolic Period, of the history of early Christianity spanned the late first century to the early fourth century, with the end marked by the First Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D.

In 313 A.D., a Roman Emperor called Constantine had a vision of a cross of light suspended before him. Shortly after this, he was victorious in a crucial battle and attributed his victory to the vision. Following this, Constantine had disturbing dreams that caused him to explore the meaning of the cross he had seen, and this ultimately led to a professed conversion to Christianity.

The authenticity of Constantine's conversion has been the subject of much debate by historians over the years, but whether genuine or not, it was certainly considered to be so by Constantine himself, and it led to dramatic changes for the Church. Christianity, now championed by the most powerful man in the world at that time, went from what was generally perceived as an obscure cult to the most highly favored national religion. With this came the end of persecution and the beginning of significant benefits for the Church, including tax exemption, wealth, power, and influence on every level, all of this being symbolized by the raising up of huge and elaborate church buildings. With Constantine's endorsement, the Church became increasingly institutional in its practices and political in its interests, as an official union between Church and State began to emerge.

In addition, a complete reversal of fortunes took place for professing Christians. Embracing Christianity no longer brought persecution, but now gave social standing and political favor. While the desire of some parents to have their children baptized was due to fear for their eternal destiny, others were more concerned that their children would suffer limitation of opportunity or loss of status by not being seen as Christian. Since water baptism was recognized as the formal act of conversion to Christianity, the practice of baptizing infants (in effect, 'Christianizing' them) began to escalate.

It took even longer for the Church to drift completely from the practice of immersion to an official endorsement of sprinkling as a legitimate method of baptism. The preference for sprinkling was no doubt in part because it would be far less traumatic to both child and parent than immersion. It wasn't until 754 A.D. that Pope Stephen III first gave authority for afflusion (pouring water over) rather than immersion, but even then only in extreme cases. The first law requiring infant baptism was made by the Roman emperor Charlemagne in 789 A.D. Its objective was to swell the number of (nominal) adherents to Christianity. As time went on and access to Scripture became highly restricted, the Biblical approach to water baptism diminished into virtual non-existence.

Over the centuries following Constantine's involvement, the Church (which apart from the similarly institutional Eastern Orthodox expression was now essentially the Roman Catholic Church) would grow to become the most powerful organization in the world, exerting more influence than any individual country. Whether one believes this was the best or worst thing that could have happened to the Church, one cannot ignore the sovereignty of God over such a monumental development. There is no denying that much good came of the strengthening of the Church, for example the gathering and maintaining of the Scriptures. Nevertheless, great evil came through the religious hypocrisy and corruption that so often accompany wealth and power.

The Church in the West would essentially be held under the control of Roman Catholicism for a period of 1,200 years. Over this time, the formal leadership of the Church, known as "clergy", became increasingly separated from the common man, both by education and wealth. The Magisterium² of the Roman Catholic Church came to establish itself as the voice of God to the common man, who had neither access to Scripture nor the educational ability to read it. The result of this was that Scripture alone was no longer considered authoritative for the life of the Christian, but rather Scripture as interpreted by the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. The Church also constructed the elaborate administration of sacraments (including the practice of infant baptism by sprinkling) by clergy in a style reminiscent of the Levitical priesthood. Even the gospel itself had become obscured, as gifted scholars found ways of devising arguments to defend a salvation that was now dispensed by the Church on the basis of works and donations.

By the beginning of the 1500's, the Roman Catholic Church had reached such a level of political corruption and falsehood in doctrine that it had become intolerable to many. In 1517, there was a major fund-raising initiative for the building of St Peter's Basilica in Rome, and the selling of "indulgences" was employed to great effect. The Roman Catholic Church had developed an unbiblical teaching regarding a place called "purgatory", where people went if they were not righteous enough for heaven but not unrighteous enough for hell! The Church taught that one could buy an indulgence, literally a signed, "get out of purgatory" certificate, for oneself or a loved one. This was the "straw that broke the camel's back" for a young German Catholic Monk called Martin Luther. He was an outstanding scholar and teacher and had access to the Scriptures, from which he was able to see the many doctrinal errors in the Church. Deeply troubled by these errors, Luther wrote a document outlining 95 doctrinal issues that he felt needed to be addressed in the Church. This would be the start of what would become known as the Reformation. It should be noted that Luther's goal was not to rebel against the Roman Catholic Church, which he very much believed in, but rather to bring about reform, hence the name Reformation (the movement also

² In the Roman Catholic Church, the word "Magisterium" refers to the teaching authority of the church. i.e., the current bishops led by the Pope.

became known as Protestantism, as its adherents were protesting against the unbiblical teachings of the Roman Catholic Church).

To Luther's shock and dismay, his desire for debate and reform was met very negatively by the hierarchy of the Church, and it quickly devolved into accusations of heresy and subsequent assassination attempts upon Luther. However, this was not to be the end of the story. The rulers of some European countries had become disgruntled with the power of the Roman Catholic Church and saw an opportunity to sever that control, while appearing spiritually pious, by lending military force to Luther's Protestantism. Consequently, many a bloody battle ensued, eventually freeing much of the Church from the tyranny and abuses of Roman Catholicism.

Above all else, this freedom would, in time and through tremendous sacrifice, lead to the glorious recovery and accessibility of the Bible. Thanks to the invention of the printing press and the Reformers' passion to translate the Bible into the languages of the people, it became available not just to Church leaders but to the common man as well. The authentic gospel of salvation through grace alone and justification through faith alone, lost for centuries, began to ring out. The truth concerning the priesthood of all believers would now begin to dismantle unbiblical concepts of leadership and bridge the division between clergy and laity. This was a truly wonderful new era for the Church, a time of restoration of many Biblical truths.

The Reformers proclaimed a return to the life of the Church found in the New Testament. They rallied under a five-part battle cry:

Sola Scriptura (by Scripture alone) - Scripture alone is our authority, not tradition;

Sola gratia (by grace alone) - Salvation is by grace alone, not merit;

Sola fide (by faith alone) - Justification is received by faith alone, not by works;

Sola Christus (through Christ alone) - Christ is the only mediator between God and man, not clergy;

Soli Deo gloria (glory to God alone) - Glory is due to God alone, not to ecclesiastical authorities.

Within such an environment, one would think that the errors of doctrine and practice regarding water baptism would be glaringly obvious, and that the outstanding theologians at the forefront of the Reformation would address the matter with their characteristic clarity. In fact, they did seem to acknowledge the strength of the Biblical evidence for baptism of believers by immersion. Here are some of their own words on the subject:

Martin Luther:

“Without personal faith no one should be baptized. Where we cannot be sure that young children are themselves believers and themselves have faith, my advice and judgment are that it is better to delay, and even better that we baptize no more children, so that we do not with such foolery and tricks make a mockery of or outrage the blessed majesty of God.” (Sermon for Third Sunday after Epiphany)

John Calvin:

“As Christ enjoins them to teach before baptizing, and desires that none but believers shall be admitted to baptism, it would appear that baptism is not properly administered unless it is preceded by faith.” (Harmony of the Gospels, vol. 3.p. 386, commenting on Matthew 28)

“Baptism is, as it were, an appurtenance of faith and therefore it is later in order; secondly, if it is given without faith, whose seal it is, it is both wicked and too gross a profanation.” (Commentary on Acts, Vol. 1, p. 362)

Shockingly however, these statements are in the context of elaborately constructed arguments (thin on Biblical reference and heavy on tradition) to *defend* the sprinkling of infants.

One of the fathers of the Reformation in Switzerland did unequivocally affirm the Biblical practice of baptism and was surprisingly honest as to why he was compromising on this issue:

Ulrich Zwingli:

“Nothing grieves me more than that at the present I have to baptize children, for I know it ought not to be done. If, however, I were to terminate the practice then I fear that I would lose my prebend [salary].” (Quellen IV, p. 184)

It is hard to know with certainty why the Reformers, who were so Bible-based in their convictions and willing to risk so much, failed either to see or to restore so clear a New Testament practice. Zwingli believed that part of the reason for the compromise was the constant social pressure from church members who wanted nothing more from their leaders than to uphold the tradition of baptizing their children. Adding greater weight to this pressure was the fact that the rulers who had supported the Reformation wanted to retain the practice of infant baptism, as it had become far more than merely a religious issue. For centuries it had been taught that an infant was not just baptized into Christ and the Church, but also into servitude to the God-ordained sovereign of that nation.

The corrupting influence of secular politics and government in connection with water baptism was also evident in relation to the translation of Scripture into the common

languages. Whereas typically the early translators did a wonderfully accurate word-for-word conversion from the original Greek manuscripts to English, for some curious reason the Greek word *baptizo*, which as we saw earlier means to dip, immerse or submerge into a liquid, was given no such translation and was instead transliterated to “baptize”. This allowed the new Protestant Churches the liberty to continue the practice of sprinkling without question.

These compromises and failures on the part of those at the forefront of the Reformation obviously robbed the Church of a full restoration to New Testament-based practice; but worse than that, they also resulted in one of the darkest and most shameful episodes in Church history. A number of believers were not prepared to compromise in their commitment to a return to the Biblical practice of water baptism. They were known as Radical Reformers or Anabaptists, *ana* coming from the Greek word meaning “again”. The fact that Anabaptists were being baptized again was in itself a rejection of the validity of their infant baptism. The Anabaptists were persecuted mercilessly, most being unwilling to confess as heresy what they knew to be Biblical truth. Many were martyred along with their family members, sometimes (in a cruel mockery of their convictions) by being drowned or even baptized alive in cauldrons of boiling oil. Terrible as this was, what made it worse was that it could not have happened without the signed approval of leaders within the Reformation.

Because of this persecution, thousands fled for their lives, embarking on hazardous trips as pilgrims in search of religious freedom. Of course, many of them found this in the “New World”, America, where today there is a huge and thriving Baptist Church, and other groups that originated from the Anabaptists.

Typically, many of the churches and colleges that have evolved out of the Reformation tradition have remained theologically strong, but in much of their style and practice tend to be very formal and are in some ways virtually undistinguishable from the Roman Catholic Church. What is even more striking is the theological blindness and centuries of drought that these branches of the Church have experienced with regard to the dynamic of the Holy Spirit. In contrast to this, many of those who escaped the persecution and settled in America became foundational to movements that have known frequent outpourings of the Holy Spirit, as well as a number of revivals that have had world impact.

In the end, we can only speculate over the reasons why many of the key figures of the early Reformers conceded on the issue of baptism. Perhaps in the balance of the many great truths they laid down their lives to restore, the unbiblical practice of water baptism did not seem to matter enough to jeopardize what had been won. The question before us now is, “Does the Biblical practice of water baptism matter?” As a

church leadership, we have answered this with a resounding “YES!” But the question must be answered by you on an individual level, too.