

## BAPTISM AS INTERPERSONAL

Virgil Warren, PhD

As a matter of standard procedure, baptism is an act of personal identification with Jesus Christ, which means commitment to his lordship, values, and purposes. In consequence of that identity with Christ, God forgives sin, gives his Spirit, and adds us to the body of Christ.

### Nature of Baptism

The primary fact about Christian baptism is that it is an (1) interpersonal act. It is done by a person in a relationship with another person for personal purposes. In personal conversion and reconciliation before God, we have the same kind of process that goes on in overcoming estrangement with people. There is no exact time when “friendship” occurs, but what is in fact a process performatively reduces to a point in, say, a handshake or a hug. No one supposes that shaking hands creates friendships; yet it does not merely reflect the friendship either since that friendship is in fact what has not existed before. It is a commitment to friendship and helps establish the friendship. It may testify to the friendship if anyone is watching, and it gives the participants a specific point in time to look back to in defining their status with each other.

Baptism has these elements too. As a handshake does not remove the past, so baptism does not remove it. It only formally removes it from affecting the present.

Baptism is a (2) performative statement, an acted statement. In an act of utterance, we accomplish the result by the “utterance” insofar as our contribution can be concerned. In this, however, performative acts convey meaning more than accomplish those results because the results are given by Another outside the action itself. They are roughly comparable to burning the flag, or “making a statement.” Such acts are “event messages.” As Old Testament ceremonies, rituals, and forms were shadows of the realities to come, so also New Testament ceremonies are shadows of the realities that have come.

Baptism is a (3) formal act. Formal acts focalize, crystallize, and make tangible certain intangible items. They infuse importance into what they represent; they have a teaching value for us who act them out because they help us define “where we are.” Ceremonies impress us with the commitment we are making in them.

Baptism as an interpersonal act means that it is (4) a “full-person” act. It is not (a) an external act. We do not relate to each other by outward behavior alone. Saying and doing things we do not mean is manipulative, not interpersonal. We call doing such things “being a smear,” “buttering somebody up,” “being artificial.” Relationships are not built on such things. Baptism is not (b) a legal act. A legal act can produce a legal effect through legal authority even when the

inner factor is absent and when personal considerations are missing, because its validity lies in the authority of the administrator as the agent of the law. Furthermore, as an interpersonal act, baptism is not (c) a natural act; that is, it does not ontically regenerate a fallen nature that has no spiritual capacity for response to God.

Baptism is a (5) positive commandment, based simply on God's delight, rather than a moral commandment, based on purpose and nature. In *Perelandra* (p. 118), C. S. Lewis offers the reason for a positive commandment. It provides an occasion for response based on love. It is not out of fear or duty, as would be so if we did not realize the interpersonal character of Christian process and the interpersonal character of actions done within it.

On the other hand, moral commandments, being based on the nature and purpose of the process, are done for added life satisfaction and happiness, with personal benefits coming to the doer.

On the interpersonal character of baptism, see "Two Basic Points About Baptism."

### Meaning of Baptism

Since baptism is a formal act, it has no meaning in itself. It means only what persons mean into it—the person who institutes it and the person who does it. The subjective intent, however, does not determine the objective intent. God has identified a meaning, but ritual acts in social frameworks do not participate in that value aside from the intentions of the candidate. Personal choice connects acts and results in interpersonal processes. No connection exists if persons do not choose to make it. A Person establishes the connection when he institutes a ritual, when a person makes that connection while performing it, and when he accepts the candidate's intention. Legal process can fall back on the administrator's authority to make that connection even aside from the awareness and intent of the candidate. Since baptism, however, has no legal, natural, or logical reinforcement of personal choice, it cannot have validity aside from personal choice.

Baptism identifies with Jesus Christ more than with the visible church as an institution or a legal-political entity. Baptism into "Christ" is not a metaphor for baptism into the "church" of Christ. Baptism into the "visible church" is not a distinction witnessed in scripture (note 1 Corinthians 12:13, however). Baptism into the church as the visible aggregate of the saints could retain the interpersonal character of baptism, but that would shift it from a vertical to horizontal direction. Scripture welds together visible and invisible church, and vertical and horizontal relationship.

### Candidate for Baptism

Baptism applies to those who have faith in Christ; so baptism does not apply to infants because (1) they cannot do what it is. Since baptism is an interpersonal act, it pertains only to those who can mean by it what it signifies. In baptism people identify with Jesus Christ. They commit themselves to Christ, his authority, purposes, and values. Those who cannot yet know him, understand his purposes, or commit themselves to his values do not have the background prerequisite for meaning into baptism what it expresses. Baptism has personal, therefore “adult,” prerequisites. In this respect, baptism is no more appropriate to infants than forced baptism would be for conquered unbelievers.

Baptism does not apply to infants because (2) they do not need what it provides. Sin and salvation from sin pertain to individual persons who can sin. Guilt and penalty for guilt cannot be transferred from one individual to another any more than a person’s act can. Infants cannot personally sin, and the sin of others (Adam) cannot be transferred to them. So, they have no need for baptism because they have no need for salvation.

#### Age of the Candidate for Baptism

Saying that baptism does not apply to infants raises the question about how old a candidate should be for believers’ baptism to become appropriate. The scripture gives no specific commandments or examples helpful in answering the question; so we face the question on the basis of first principles stemming from the nature of the case.

Determining the age for baptism amounts to deciding how early baptism can legitimately occur. Everyone agrees that people may do it when they are old enough; so the question is not how late, but how soon. With no commandment or precedent, the issue must be settled from an understanding of the interpersonal character of Christianity, and so from basic doctrine, human development, this person’s progress and circumstance, and perhaps cultural considerations.

We would not expect scripture to indicate a standardized age for candidacy, because the situation does not involve uniformity. On the one hand, children differ: some young people develop faster than others spiritually; some young people come from homes with more spiritual parenting than others; some children grow up in stronger churches to reinforce their continued faithfulness and growth in the faith.

On the other hand, no threshold exists for making baptism appropriate. The immediate baptism of the Philippian jailor’s household implies a moderate level of understanding. Indeed, the very nature of commitment to a person by a person involves a whole range of appropriate degrees on both sides of the issue—degree of understanding or degree of things understood. Interpersonal commitments are at the level of the whole more than at the level of accumulating particulars within the whole. The extent to which people trust equals the extent to which they commit, and both extents proceed upward together as experience together matures. Where there

is no commandment there can be no disobedience; where there can be no commandment there can be no disobedience all the more. But we are still concerned with expediency, propriety, and effectiveness.

How a question is asked determines what answers it can have. In this instance, the problem is complicated by the way the question is usually put: it asks an either-or question (point) about a degree matter (process). Whether someone is old enough supposes a point in time when the person becomes old enough, but (1) growing up is a degree matter. We know from experience that we are dealing with a degree problem; so we should not expect to identify a point-in-time solution.

(2) Baptism unto Christ for remission of sin deals with standard procedure. The age for baptism poses no serious dilemma unless the young person dies unbaptized after that person's age of accountability. Since most children past this age grow to maturity, mortality during the uncertain years is exceptional and must be treated as a special case rather than as a matter of standard procedure.

Being old enough to sin does not necessarily mean needing salvation from the guilt of sin because (3) God can choose not to count sin against us regardless. Being in error does not require being held in error. God knows that baptism has been delayed, not to disobey, but to obey properly. Withholding questionable obedience does not amount to disobedience since the motive is different. The Father knows whether the heart of a young believer is right, and he realizes that his own revelation has left this question open.

(4) Baptism is a positive command. Unlike belief, repentance, confession, commitment, or trust, baptism is not inherently required by the kind of thing salvation is. God could have selected some other act for identifying with Christ. The significance of baptism is something God has assigned to it; otherwise, it would not mean what it does. All the more, then, it is clear that God can save without baptism should unusual conditions exist and standard procedure not apply.

(5) Christian baptism is an interpersonal act. By remembering that an interpersonal process can operate by degrees, we can buy time for a young person to "become." Since interpersonalism can accommodate contraries, a person can be old enough for baptism, be in need of forgiveness, and yet die "unlost" without being baptized even though baptism into Christ is unto remission of sins. We are dealing with a personal God who loves before he condemns (John 3:16), who knows motives, and who seeks our welfare through growth.

Since salvation deals with reconciling estranged persons, interpersonal principles establish and continue fellowship between people and God. As a part of that process, baptism has an ultimately interpersonal character rather than a legal one. It is not a church act as if the church administered it and dispensed the grace that accompanies it. It is also not a church act because it

is not primarily for bringing people into the church, though it has that secondary consequence. The fact that baptism is not a legal act affects our present question, because law provides only for the options specified within the law. Alternatives do not exist under law because of the simple fact that they are not included in the law. There is no basis for bringing alternatives to bear. A legal way of looking at salvation would require the conclusion that without baptism a young person would not be saved. An interpersonal way of looking at it has people wanting to do it when it becomes natural for them to do it and has God understanding why they have not done it even though they could have. Under a legal conceptualization, there has even been the idea of pre-natal baptism, a case that may arise when a difficult birth may mean the loss of the child's life before delivery.

Baptism as an interpersonal act also affects the present question because legal matters have an either-or format: either people have sinned or not, they are guilty or not; they are old enough or not, they will go to heaven or not. A problem like the candidate's age cannot be solved because the real situation does not have an either-or character. The main difficulty comes from mixing a degree matter (human development) with an either-or question (saved-lost) without further qualification. The following pattern of thought summarizes the predicament:

If a person is old enough to sin,

he is old enough to need salvation from the guilt of sin.

If he needs salvation from the guilt of sin,

he is lost without baptism because it is for remission of sins.

But an interpersonal construction can handle unusual circumstances because it adds possibilities from the person of God and takes matters of degree into consideration on the part of the candidate.

On the background of the principles above, we can notice some factors that move baptism later. (1) Baptism does not have to be hurried for fear of lostness if some calamity were to strike. In the other direction, (2) the more maturity there is, the more meaningful the baptism is, because fewer dimensions of the event go unnoticed. (3) Not pushing young people into baptism helps avoid their later concern about its validity. If they are quite young, the memory of it will fade more easily, so they tend later to doubt whether they really understood what they were doing and whether their motivations were satisfactory. So, parents and ministers ought not feel pressured into baptizing them too soon, and should minimize the peer influences that aged person may be responding to. Above all things, parents must resist for the child's sake any temptation to suppose he or she is a precocious child. That inclination may be little more than a subtle desire to appear superior to norm.

There are some factors that move baptism earlier. Someone reared in a dedicated Christian environment may have greater sensitivity to biblical matters and want to be involved

accordingly. By fostering growth afterward, a strong Christian home can reinforce an earlier commitment expressed in baptism. To a certain extent, church and family can help a young candidate make up in growth what was lacking in birth. In this way they can supply later what may not have been adequately present earlier.

As an added note, communions that dissociate baptism from salvation have less reason to delay baptism to a salvifically more appropriate time. Their typical alternative is to view baptism as gaining membership in the visible church—or less likely, as testifying to others. These understandings lessen the concern about baptizing six or seven-year-old children.

The above comments only establish guidelines, not a specific time; children mature at different rates and growth is a process. It is helpful to note that many cultures have a “rite of passage” that happens about the time of puberty. *Bar mitzvah* among the Jews occurs at thirteen (cp. Luke 2:41-51? Romans 7:9?). Christian communions that practice infant baptism may place confirmation at about that time—when personal commitment can take place. There are expressions like “age of accountability,” “age of responsibility,” “age of reason,” and even a phrase from antiquity “puberty of the soul.”

That time seems natural because candidates not only need to know right from wrong; they need to understand the consequences of social actions. Sexual awareness is also awakening. Commitment to Christian living includes all aspects of personhood, including sexuality. At that time in life also comes the socialization stage, when young people can more adequately look at situations from the perspective of others. In their cognitive development, children can start thinking more abstractly; so in a growing way they can operate by principles rather than in terms of concrete operations or rules and regulations. Finally, at about junior high age, young people begin dropping out of Sunday school, youth meetings, and the like. The behavior may indicate that they have reached a time when they are making decisions about spiritual matters for themselves.

Taken together, these considerations predict that baptism sooner than, say, nine or ten years old is not very natural. It seems better to aim at ten to thirteen so the age of accountability can correlate with the period of socialization, the time of full physical development (puberty), and mental maturation.

### Proxy Baptism

Proxy baptism means baptism by one person in place of another. Such a practice is irrelevant because (a) baptism is an interpersonal act, so it must be a person’s own act. Baptism for the dead breaches that principle because salvation as reconciliation makes proxy baptism foreign to the purpose of the act. It is comparable to proxy faith—of parents or God-parents—as a way to involve faith in baptizing infants.

(b) Baptism as formal ritual does not involve natural, legal, or logical necessity. Tying a person's eternal destiny (personal relationship to God) to a ritual act is likewise inappropriate by the nature of the case: it is un-natural. If baptism is interpersonal, then natural, legal, and logical necessity do not apply. Employing a proxy treats baptism as if salvation could not occur without it, and as if it could occur through a substitute. Rather, baptism is interpersonally necessary; that is, it is necessary because a Person commanded it as an appropriate condition for blessings He gives that person in connection with it.

### Administrator of Baptism

Since baptism is an interpersonal act, it does not require any special administrator. Strictly speaking, no one "administers" baptism anyway because baptism is the "candidate's" act. Requiring special administrators assumes a legal format where the administrator represents the system as an authorized executor of the law. The validity of the experience would be administrator-dependent much as the validity of a marriage has traditionally depended on a legitimate representative of the state. If baptism is understood to be an interpersonal act between the candidate and God, its validity does not depend on who assists in its performance. The practical concern is for the solemnity and meaningfulness of the experience as impacted by the administrator.

As a safeguard against abuse, some groups have adopted the practice of having ordained "clergy" perform baptisms. They have done so for practical more than doctrinal reasons. Avoiding misuse is appropriate, but requiring clerical administration is overkill and can foster an unhealthy view of baptism as the extreme it seeks to avoid.

A general principle applies here: those qualified to evangelize are qualified to baptize. The same seriousness that prompts witnessing safeguards against impropriety.

### Form of Baptism

The efficacy of form in interpersonal process has the character of appropriateness (*τὸ πρέπον*) rather than inherent necessity. The reason a rite has the form it does comes by positive commandment based on the choice of the person who establishes it. What form, if any, that person chooses depends on some analogy between its meaning and its form. Efficacy relates to choice rather than nature as in the physical realm, authority as in the legal realm, or logic as in the rational realm. The form of this ordinance can be gathered from the meaning of its label ("to dip"), from examples of it (Acts 8:38—administrator and candidate both in the water), and from lessons pictured by it (Romans 6:1-5—death and burial of the "old man" and resurrection of the "new").

## Necessity of Baptism

Requiring the right form for efficacy forgets that a person stands beyond the rite both in the candidate and in the commander. Forms do not accomplish their results without interpersonal factors, but interpersonal dynamics theoretically do not have to be focalized in a special ritual expression. The necessity of baptism derives from the positive commandment of God rather than from the process itself.

Not understanding that believers' baptism should have occurred (rather than paedobaptism) is a species of "ignorance" also, even though revelation has occurred on the matter. Contemporary students of that revelation, we believe, have misunderstood it despite efforts to interpret it right. We ought to be able to say more than that we can see how God could save the unimmersed believer and yet be consistent with himself and with his New Testament witness. We ought to be able to say with Paul that in principle such people are saved, which is the same thing as extending to them the right hand of Christian fellowship and considering them fellow members of Christ's body. We do not need to withhold comment in given cases because of our ignorance of motives and other factors on this matter. Each of us has the responsibility to teach such people the way of the Lord more perfectly as we see it, as well as to be tractable ourselves.

In Romans 2:26-27 Paul says that doing the ordinances of the Law means counting uncircumcision for circumcision. So, regardless of what circumcision meant, its absence does not frustrate its spiritual effect. Paul speaks as he does because circumcision is a formal act not inherently necessary to its effect. Conscience (in the absence of revelation) would never lead a person to know that God wanted circumcision to express a certain meaning, because the nature of the case could not predict it (no inherent necessity). Paul does not take a non-committal stance here, saying that he sees how God could grant the resulting salvation (being a Jew "inwardly") to them. Instead, he affirms that God will overlook their not doing what ignorance omitted.

The case of baptism seems parallel because it, too, is a formal act, does not have inherent necessity, involves ignorance by way of honest misunderstanding, and is in an interpersonal system of things. (Circumcision as regards salvation and acceptability to God was in the context of interpersonal things as well as nationality identity.) In the case of adults who were circumcised, there was to be a circumcision of the heart as well (although that element might not be present in the circumcision of slaves). At any rate, salvation was not tied to it as Paul's Jewish contemporaries seemed to think.

Paul may have been arguing for the salvation of σεβόμενοι in Romans 2:26-27. The "God-fearers" refused circumcision and the full status of proselyte even though they had participated in the synagogue events and practiced the ethical standards of Judaism. But Paul

seems in 2:12 to have people in mind who are more distant than these “God-fearers” since he speaks of them as judged by conscience rather than the Law (2:13).

The ordinances of the Law included circumcision itself, so Paul has in mind dynamic factors (“moral law”) not based on positive commandment but arising from the nature of the case (interpersonalism). The Second Great Commandment fulfills the Law (Romans 12:8-10) only as to fundamental moral law since love in and of itself would never lead to the civil and ceremonial aspects of the Law: sacrificial rituals, festival observance, dietary regulations, Sabbath laws.

### Formula for Baptism

Since baptism is neither a magic act nor a legal transaction, specifically authorized wording does not pertain to the issue. Words spoken do not validate interpersonal acts. As long as a candidate understands the meaning, the experience is valid as long as commitment to Christ is intended in the obedience. Scripture commands no special wording for the event although it has become customary to repeat the description Jesus gave it in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19: *“baptized into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”*) or the description of the baptism of the twelve in Acts 19:5 (*“baptized them into the name of the Lord Jesus”*).

### Re-baptism

Since reconciliation refers to establishing interpersonal relationship—particularly with God, it means to be permanent because relationships are permanent. When people enter a friendship, they give no thought to how long. Friendships are by nature permanent. Salvation is more like marriage than getting a driver’s license. Legal and physical processes may need to be redone. A driver’s license needs to be renewed periodically because the law stipulates that its validity is time referenced.

Baptism has an interpersonal character and relates to initiation rather than continuation or summation. Re-baptism theoretically would not be called for by any new development in the relationship. In most cases that people raise, “re-baptism” is not really a second baptism. Since we do not consider infant baptism as baptism, baptism later would not be re-baptism (note Anabaptists). People baptized without belief were not really baptized; they were not committing themselves to Christ in that act. The reason may have been pressure from parents or peers, irrelevant privileges sought (“rice Christians”), a desire to satisfy a potential spouse (when the heart was not in it), or a total lack of awareness of what “baptism” was all about. Baptism later would not be re-baptism in these cases either.

One moot question derives from the apostasy possibility. Scripture gives no clear statement, commandment, or example of re-conversion so as to indicate whether baptism should

be involved. (Jude 22-23 may envision a reconversion, but baptism does not enter the presentation; note also 2 Timothy 2:26) Interpersonalism, however, does provide principles to work with.

The first interpersonal observation regarding re-baptism is that baptism is a ritual, formal act. As such, it has no inherent necessity by nature, logic, or law. The inference seems to be that recommitment without baptism makes sense. On the other hand, being baptized a second time would be natural as an act of re-identification with Christ. Opinion can reign here because either option would make sense on interpersonal grounds. In other words, it helps to know that even opposite answers to the question can be correct. The wise course seems to be to let candidates make the decision; they know themselves better than an administrator does. Besides, it is their obedience, not anyone else's.

In other cases, people may wonder whether they were too young, because they cannot remember their baptism well. They may wonder whether they understood sufficiently or correctly what they were doing at the time. Perhaps they have changed some aspects of their understanding of baptism. Under these circumstances they may feel better about their obedience to Christ if they were baptized. In interpersonal theory, people can "re-mean" the significance of their former, good-faith act to that of more correct obedience. Of course, as a matter of opinion, it could be done again with a new intent. Again, it is a gain to know that we can solve an issue in more than one way. We would discourage Christians' getting baptized in the Jordan while visiting the Holy Land as a kind of sentimental connection to the place. That seems to attach credence to irrelevant matters.

A second interpersonal observation regarding re-baptism is that baptism is essentially the "candidate's" act. Its validity does not depend on an administrator. The one performing the baptism is not in as good a position as the candidate to know the adequacy of previous faith. The assistant may suggest observations that would make it unnecessary—like the idea that people can make up in growth whatever they lacked in "birth." Since the matter could go either way, the candidate makes the decision, and the administrator acts accordingly without compromising personal convictions.

A third interpersonal observation on re-baptism is that the motivation of persons can have a bearing on obedience. The person wants to glorify the Lord in his obedience on this matter, and the Lord knows that. In the absence of guidelines, either approach—rebaptizing or simply praying (cp. Acts 8:18-24?)—makes sense from first principles. The fact that baptism is an interpersonal act may explain the lack of commandment or precedent on such cases. The situation allows motivation to dictate behavior, which can vary from person to person.

## Validity of Baptism Done for Other Reasons

We stated earlier that baptism unites us with Christ. God gives remission of sins, the gift of the Spirit, and church membership on the basis of that union with Christ. Baptism then logically precedes the benefits God gives even though for practical purposes we may view it all as happening simultaneously. For that reason, scripture can even say baptism saves us—a shorthand expression for baptism [into identification with Christ] unto salvation by forgiveness (1 Peter 3:21).

Some Christians fear that associating baptism with salvation creates the impression in candidates that they are saving themselves by doing it. They would be attaching undue significance to what they are doing and that may result in pride. The fear is also that baptism becomes a work in the sense of a legal transaction: if people follow the procedure, they get the benefit. Being superficial and external enters the situation. So, instead of associating baptism with salvation, people with these concerns reinterpret baptism as what brings us into the visible church or as an outward sign of a previous inward grace, or as a testimony to others.

Our opinion has been that where there is obedience, God gives the benefits of obedience. Adult believers have obeyed Christ's command. He is the one who gives the benefits; the candidate's precise understanding does not modify what those benefits are precisely. This last point we do not mean in an extreme sense. Obviously, if there were no awareness of what is going on—recognizing Christ as Savior, blindly going through a ritual would not lead to God's gifts. But these believers are doing the same things we are advocating: they are coming to God through Christ; they are baptized in Christ's name, not someone else's; they are believing, repenting, confessing, and trusting Christ; they understand that forgiveness is the central issue. The difference lies in where they understand the forgiveness occurs in the process. Keeping the meaning of baptism at the more general level (identification with Christ) reduces the fear of works; the general level of identification shows in doing the baptism in the name of Christ. Candidates are fulfilling a condition; conditions do not cause results; they meet a condition for the other person to give that result. Baptism is then an act of faith/trust that the other person will give the result. It is like the situation where Jesus tells the woman with an issue of blood that her faith has made her whole (Matthew 9:22). The faith did not cause the healing; it met a condition for Jesus' giving the healing.

We have repeated the dictum that baptism is an interpersonal act. Nevertheless, an illustration from legal procedure may communicate our point. In buying a home, we may not be sure when we actually take possession. Is it when we sign the papers? When the deed is recorded? When we pay the previous owner? When we finish paying the loaning institution? We do not necessarily need to know precisely when. We know that the purpose of the process is for gaining possession of the home, and we make sure to do everything that is expected. The result is

that we own the home. If such is true in legal procedure, how much more it would seem to be true in dealing with a personal God who loves us and knows our hearts and intentions.

### Requests to Be Baptized for Other Reasons

The primary conviction here is that God determines the benefits of his appointed acts. That is not done by a candidate or a administrator. When we obey him, he grants what he has promised. Our understanding does not determine the exact meaning of our responses. If people are willing to affirm in principle what the scripture says about the significance of the act, we go ahead and help them obey the Lord. Of course, initial Bible study should have accompanied the baptism as well. In the process there can be a meeting of minds on what God intends the ordinance to mean. Subsequent teaching may adjust the meaning of previous obedience without requiring that the obedience be redone.

### Parental Prohibition of Baptism

The problem can be considered in light of what was outlined under “Age of the Candidate.” Baptism can be delayed until such time as the young person comes of legal age. For another thing, baptizing minors comes under matters of opinion. Furthermore, we must recognize the principle that minors should honor their parents. Teenagers might be using baptism to assert independence, and we would not want to be party to unwholesome family relations. Parents may understand more about their young person than the church worker does. They may really be doubting more the maturity of this desire than objecting to it. On other occasions, a respectful discussion with parents may clarify misconceptions. They may suppose, for example, that their young person is being baptized into the church rather than into Christ, or they may fear that unhealthy manipulation is occurring. When patience allays these fears, they may consent. Time and mutual respect may solve the problem in a natural manner one way or the other.

### Difficult Circumstances

Over the years the church has taken two approaches to what to do in circumstances that make immersion difficult, if not impossible. One has been to substitute something besides immersion that can be done in that situation. That is really where pouring and sprinkling came from originally. Such instances are called “clinical baptisms.” The greater ease of sprinkling especially, combined later with infant baptism to become the normal “mode” of baptism in state churches.

The second approach considers special circumstances as beyond what was meant by New Testament practice and teaching; so nothing is done if baptism itself cannot be done. The confidence is that dynamic factors like faith, repentance, and commitment suffice when formal

acts cannot be performed. Similar incidents occur in the Old and New Testaments. Jesus awarded life to the thief on the cross even though the condemned man could not do anything normally required for his cleansing (Luke 23:39-43). So that they might partake of the Passover, King Hezekiah prayed for some pilgrims from the Northern Kingdom who had not purified themselves “according to the purification of the sanctuary,” and the Lord “hearkened to Hezekiah and healed the people” (2 Chronicles 30:15-20). Without condemnation, David and his soldiers illegally ate the showbread from the tabernacle when they were famished (1 Samuel 21:6; Luke 6:1-5; etc.). Particularly with ritual observances established by positive commandments, God gives precedence to personal considerations: He “desires mercy more than sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6; Matthew 12:7). He did not originally give commandment through Moses out of a desire to get sacrifices offered to him (Jeremiah 7:22-23). Special circumstances could suspend Sabbath regulations (Luke 14:5; Matthew 12:5-6) even when it was necessary only for an animal’s welfare (Luke 13:15-16). The Sabbath was made for people, not *vice versa* (Mark 2:27; Exodus 23:12). In like manner, we take it, baptism was made for people, not people for baptism. Risking life and health misses the point: baptism does not have that kind of importance or necessity. As the Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28), so also we believe he is Lord of baptism.

### The Unbaptized and Observing the Lord’s Supper

Scripture does not deal with such a situation. It seems natural that observing communion would correlate with observing baptism. If the Lord’s Supper is to mean what was intended, participants would have the same understanding and commitment that was necessary for being baptized. If they have that awareness, they could go ahead and be baptized. Whatever would keep them from being baptized would presumably disqualify them from partaking of the emblems.

Special cases might be imagined for those who cannot be baptized or for those whose parents might forbid baptism but not communion. Forbidding children of “visitors” or of those weak in the faith may do more harm than the harmless eating of unleavened bread and drinking some grape juice in an admittedly Christian context. Doing such things does not mean much to such kids, so it does not mean anything bad. They do associate it with Christ in some measure because it happens at church. The intent of the heart will have to dictate in all such circumstances.

Conceiving of communion as an act of worship provides a context that gives more rationale to observance by those not baptized. (See elsewhere on this website comments on this matter.)

### Attitude Toward Paedobaptists and Believers Affused as Adults

Immersionists do well to acknowledge a difference between baptism and other acts like faith, repentance, and commitment. Baptism is a “positive” commandment as distinguished from one based on the nature of the case. It is not “inherently” necessary, but necessary because God commands it instead of some other act for identifying with Christ formally. In the Old Testament period there was salvation, but baptism had not been instituted; so salvation is theoretically possible without it. Faith, repentance, and commitment, however, arise from the very kind of thing salvation is. We see no inconsistency, then, in God’s saving those who sincerely misunderstand his will on this issue as long as the “dynamic,” or interpersonal, factors are present. That is one reason we do not have to consider affusionists unsaved even though we believe immersion is God’s intention. It’s just that we have no right to speak for him that he will honor this substitute in any and all circumstances. One thing we can say: God is not trying to see how many people he can keep out of heaven. We can also say that proper attitude toward him calls for our not presuming on his grace to take any act or practice we would rather put in the process of conversion and Christian living in place of his directives. A third thing we can say is that baptism is a formal act, which we would not expect to stand in the way of an interpersonal relationship in the context of godly motive and attitude.

Another thing we can say for sure: if we expect God to play fair with us, we must play fair with him. We cannot expect him to accept substitute obedience if we have not made appropriate effort to determine his intentions on any kind of commandment he has given us for responding to his gracious attitude toward us..

Local church membership raises the thorniest issue about those affused or baptized as infants. Since we have understood scripture as teaching believers’ immersion, we have a dilemma between honoring the authority of scripture as we understand it and honoring the faith of believers that love Christ. They are as committed to him as we are; they are also as convinced that infant baptism is scriptural as we are convinced that scripture does not teach it. If we extend to them membership in our congregation because all those in the universal church have a right to membership in any local expression of it, then we in theory deny that believers’ immersion is baptism, which identifies us with Christ unto forgiveness of sins, gift of the Spirit, and church membership. If we debar them from membership because scripture means believers’ immersion unto forgiveness of sins through Christ, we imply that they are not saved. Besides, we become self-contradictory by debarring them from membership while affirming the necessary principle that we are Christians only, not the only Christians. More importantly, we have no right to pronounce upon the status of someone else’s servant. The problem is especially acute because it arises from our understanding of scripture, not from scripture itself. Neither we nor they can proceed as if that distinction between scripture’s teaching and our understanding of it does not

exist. God has not directed us on how to deal with this matter; so inference from first principles provide the only source for solution.

One final set of complicating factors is that the New Testament sets no precedent for local church membership anyway. Owning church property further intensifies concern because we might fear that accumulating those committed to a different doctrine could “lose control of the church” and lose its property. The last set of fears arises particularly in congregations that practice local autonomy and operate democratically in the choice and confirmation of leadership and other important decisions the congregation makes together.

Some observations appear to reduce the difficulty. Local church membership exists only for procedural purposes. Historically, it safeguarded against outsiders taking over a congregation through the voting process. The main consideration is voting privileges in the election of officers and in making other corporate decisions. Immersed believers from other congregations also do not participate in such matters. Immersed believers under a certain age even within the congregation do not vote either according to the local by-laws. Strictly speaking, we make no more definite affirmation about the salvation of immersed believers in our own congregation than we do about unimmersed believers outside it. We try to affirm honestly the biblical truths in principle, but we do not attempt to affirm the status of specific persons. Lastly, there is a distinction between qualifications for membership and qualifications for leadership.

While these observations help, they do not solve. Immersed believers from other congregations, for example, could become members of this congregation while paedobaptists could not. Immersed members not of age cannot vote; therefore, membership is not simply for reasons of voting privileges. Congregations practice “open communion” while acknowledging that the Lord’s Supper naturally applies only to who worship as Christians. If we have no right to invite or debar because the Supper is the Lord’s, it seems appropriate not to invite or debar because the church is the Lord’s. We participate together in worship, education, and fellowship, but feel inconsistent doing so in membership. The privilege of worship is different from the privilege of membership, we have heard it said; but how is it different in a way that justifies doing one and forbidding the other? The answer probably lies most in our concern for salvation itself as distinguished from those activities associated with it.

Interpreters have suggested some ways of addressing that dilemma. The difficulty comes from the concept of local church membership itself. Open membership and closed membership both imply something we feel uncomfortable with. We could explore the possibility of dispensing with it as procedural rather than biblical because of the difficulties it creates for Christian unity. That would call for higher responsibility on the part of the eldership; voting by the local constituents would be confirmatory more often than final. The elders would confirm the

choosing of teachers and other helpers by groups within the congregation. The congregation could continue to teach and practice believers' immersion only.

Another option has been to adopt an interdenominational system among evangelicals and simply acknowledge that a non-denominational system may not always be practical. To avoid continual conflict over this and related issues, we could group ourselves separately at the basic level and make provision for regularly gathering the whole Christian community to maintain identity, reaffirm each other, and keep the lines of communication open.

Finally, we can remember that what cannot be solved in theory can often be solved interpersonally. We can deal with the problem with through proper attitude and mutual respect. We can encourage these believers to participate fully in fellowship, study, and worship including communion. At the same time, we can study the matter together from scripture without putting pressure on each other to change practice before changing conviction.

### Baptizing Paedobaptists Without Implying Their Previous Lostness

We might be inclined to consider this situation an academic since it is possible to go ahead now and be baptized. But there are other people still in that circumstance; the problem is hardly academic to them. The fruit of the Christian life was present all those years. Having the results without the status may raise profound questions about the Christian experience.

Some examples from the New Testament seem to oppose the thought that obeying now means being lost before. Evidently, saved Jews could come to John's baptism without denying their salvation before that time; otherwise, all Jews prior to John's ministry were not God's children. Disciples of John could be baptized in the name of Jesus without implying that the day before they heard the gospel of Christ they would have been lost if they had died (Acts 19:1-7). There is nothing unreal about a saved person's being baptized into identity with Christ, identity with whom is the real basis on which God forgives sin. Even sinless Jesus could be baptized for remission of sins because baptism is most fundamentally identification with the goal of the act rather than the accomplishment of it. People's obedience now amounts to a condition for continuing the status God has already viewed them as having. In these cases, we sometimes say that the candidate is completing his obedience or reaffirming his faith in Christ.

As with other matters in life, we make decisions on the information we have at the time. When additional insight comes, we alter and update our decisions accordingly. Formerly we believed and acted in keeping with what we understood about baptism—and other matters. Perhaps now, new insight calls for new action.

### Evaluation of “Trine” Immersion and “Jesus-Only” Baptism

Trine baptism and Jesus-only baptism attempt to work the trinity issue into the form of baptism. Trine baptism performs the act of baptism three times instead of once. It attempts to incorporate into its form the belief that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three persons. Jesus-only baptism is done in the name of Jesus, not Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The conviction is that God is at least ultimately a single being; baptism then should be a single act. The featured contrast here is with trine baptism.

Our own practice has been to immerse once without conceiving of that act as a comment on the trinity question either way. It appears to us that under a three-person view of trinity, the more important truth is their unity rather than their distinctness. That difficult doctrine does not have to be brought into the baptism act at all, however. Biblical examples of baptism are not described in sufficient detail to indicate a threefold act rather than a single act, and no grammatical or word-based observation establishes the idea of a threefold action as baptism.

Since we practice single-action baptism, the issue reduces to the trinitarian question. We prefer not to make the precise understanding of the trinity a matter of fellowship. Such an approach assumes a willingness to affirm in principle all biblical statements and events that bear on the question. During time there must be enough distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit for the Son to pray to the Father, the Father to send the Spirit, and the Spirit to be “another” Advocate from the Son who prayed for his coming (John 14:16). There must be a legitimate way of understanding the statement that before the world the Word was “with” God. The Son can be legitimately pictured after time as on the right hand of God (Hebrews 12:2, *etc.*). We may not be able to conceive of the exact nature of the Father-Son-Spirit relationship because we do not know of anything comparable to it in the physical realm. So, we can accept Jesus-only baptism because the issue does not necessarily affect the process of salvation or the experience of Christian living it leads to.

### Baptism and Church Membership “Elsewhere”

Baptism does not identify us with a particular group of people, whether a congregation or a denomination. It is an interpersonal act that unites us with Christ, not the church, much a local expression of the church. Its primary focus is vertical toward Jesus rather than horizontal toward other people. We should express our concerns and give reasons for them, but we are in no position to “refuse water” in helping someone obey Christ just because of something subsequent we consider inadvisable. Each step of growth has to be handled in its proper time. Baptism is not the time for trying to decide advanced doctrinal questions that even seasoned believers still discuss.

### Private baptism

Accounts of conversion in the Book of Acts show no concern for baptizing converts during public church services on the first day of the week. There does not appear to be a clear example of it. The Ethiopian eunuch was virtually alone except for the chariot driver and Philip—and perhaps other attendants (Acts 8:36-38). As soon as the Peter saw that God intended to accept Gentiles, he commanded the household of Cornelius to be baptized right then in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:44-48). The Philippian jailer was baptized the same hour of the night when he heard the gospel (Acts 16:29-33). Baptism so closely accompanied conversion that it was done at that time rather than at a congregational meeting.

Since baptism is an interpersonal act between sinner and Savior, it is associated with coming to Christ rather than with coming to church. We are not so much baptized into the church as baptized into Christ. The obedience is not a church act that calls for observation by the assembly, but an interpersonal act that can occur wherever and whenever any person desires to call on the name of our omniscient Savior. Baptism does not accomplish a legal transaction but expresses personal commitment. It is not a work but an act of commitment. It does not deal especially with what happens on Sunday, during a church service, or in a church building. Spiritual, interpersonal activities are not tied to certain times or specific places.

### Salvation Before Baptism?

In restoring broken relationships where we as offended party want the offender to change, we count positive attitude as good toward the desired end even before complete change occurs. We can see how God can treat baptism the same way. If the expected outward act does not eventually occur when it becomes known, the inner factors are not necessarily regarded as sufficient. When the outward does occur, the offended and offender fit it into the set of responses as if it had occurred in its natural place. This kind of reorganization can occur in a person's mind, whether offender or offended, as long as all the parts happen.

The notes above illustrate the host of doctrinal and practical issues that surface in connection with baptism. All the decisions offered here derive from our understanding of the impact of one constant: the interpersonal purpose and character of the Christian faith. That seminal factor feeds off onto subunits, related practices, and unaddressed considerations. Interpersonalism is the all-purpose tool for working on all the features of the faith and its applications. Without that tool, no solution can be found and proposed solutions may be irrelevant, erroneous, or counterproductive.

For more elaborated treatments of many of these questions, see *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 225-409