

Chapter Fourteen

“Is alien immersion a thing?”

“THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST: GUARDIAN OF THE ORDINANCE OF BAPTISM”

Matthew 28.19

This chapter deals with an issue that is secondary in importance to the Biblical doctrine of salvation. After all, salvation has to do with the miracles of creation and recreation, the virgin birth and the sacrificial death of our Lord Jesus Christ, His glorious resurrection from the dead followed by His monumental ascension to glory and God’s right hand on high. It also has to do with the forgiveness of our sins, justification by faith in Christ, sanctification by faith throughout the Christian’s life, and the deliverance of the saints of God into the presence of the Savior. I am persuaded that my readers are agreed on such issues as these. Therefore, I present this chapter dealing with the ordinance of believer baptism.

The chief distinguishing characteristic of Baptists, as opposed to other Christians since early on in Christian history, has been this matter of baptism. Other groups of Christians have sometimes resembled Baptists regarding Church government. Other groups of Christians have frequently resembled Baptists regarding the Gospel message. However, no other group of Christians has as consistently practiced Scriptural baptism as have Baptists. What is Scriptural baptism? It is baptism as it is practiced in the Word of God, baptism as it is commanded in the Word of God, and baptism as it is authorized by the Word of God.

We live in a day when most pastors, and far too many Baptist pastors, baptize anyone who wants to be baptized, without exercising caution or discretion about the candidate who seeks baptism. As well, far too many pastors, including far too many Baptist pastors, exercise poor judgment concerning the authenticity of the baptism of someone who seeks membership in their Church. Baptism is important. I seek to establish that baptism is one of two Church ordinances given by Christ to the Church.

Therefore, it is wise for us to be careful about whom this ordinance is administered to, how this ordinance is administered, and to what purpose this ordinance is administered.

Four considerations will be helpful to crystallize your position on this topic:

First, THE COMMAND TO BAPTIZE

Matthew 28.19-20 is where the complete example of what is commonly referred to as the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ is to be found. The Greek text contains a single verb accompanied by three participles that explain how the verb is to be accomplished:

- 19 Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:
- 20 Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, *even* unto the end of the world. Amen.

The Greek verb in the passage shows that Jesus Christ directed His disciples to make disciples. The participles show that disciples were to be made while going, by baptizing, and by teaching to observe all things Christ commanded. Thus, the directive to baptize is integral to the process of fulfilling the Great Commission.

What is typically ignored by many professing Christians and Christian denominations concerning baptism is that not only is baptism commanded by Christ, but how to baptize, who to baptize, and to what end baptism is to be performed is also indicated in God's Word. Thus, the notion that one can do what the Lord Jesus Christ directed while ignoring how the Lord Jesus Christ directed it is inconsistent with what we know in Scripture.

Next, THE CONSEQUENCE OF BAPTISM

Because most in Christendom baptize infants (paedobaptism being unscriptural in the extreme) many who profess to be Christians and most

others who do not profess to be Christians misconstrue a great deal about baptism. Allow me to mention just a few of the consequences of baptism:

First, baptism is an act of obedience on the part of the congregation performing the baptism. Note the significance of the previous statement. Read the Great Commission once more, and you may notice to whom the directive was issued. The Lord Jesus did not here direct new converts to be baptized. The Lord Jesus directed His disciples to baptize. Thus, the modern-day dynamic of hopeful converts insisting that pastors baptize them, insisting that congregations baptize them, or behaving as though they were authoritative in seeking baptism for themselves does not reflect what we find in the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹ When someone is baptized, it is the congregation that is obeying Christ.

Second, baptism is the means whereby a Christian becomes an integral part of a Church of Jesus Christ, a member of the body if you will. Here is where many Baptists and our beloved Protestant brethren are frequently divergent. Protestants are a bit like the Roman Catholic Church they protest against when they claim the church is universal. Roman Catholics claim their group is the universal *visible* church of Jesus Christ. To refute that counter-reformation argument, Protestants claimed that they were the universal *invisible* church of Jesus Christ.

Both groups are wrong, with Protestants certainly being incorrect when they insist that every Christian receives Spirit baptism at the time of his new birth and is incorporated into the invisible body of Christ.² That claim reveals confusion about the body of Christ and the family of God. As soon as a sinner comes to faith in Christ, he is born again into God's family and is also sealed by the Spirit. What about Spirit baptism? It does *not* happen, though that issue was dealt with in chapter six. The Scriptural reality is that the congregation is the Church, the body, and baptism is the means by which someone who is already a Christian is brought into the fellowship of a local Church and is placed under the authority of that local Church. Acts 2.41:

¹ It would be presumptuous to conclude from the abbreviated facts in the text that the Ethiopian eunuch was seeking baptism in Acts 8.36. My opinion is that his mention of baptism was in response to baptism being an integral part of Philip's presentation of the Gospel.

² Chafer, *Vol. VI*, pages 40-41 and *Vol. VII*, pages 32-34.

“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added *unto them* about three thousand souls.”

How can we verify this to be true? In two ways: *First*, there are no examples of baptism performed in the Bible to make someone a Christian. *Second*, there are many passages in God’s Word that show salvation to be a matter of faith in Christ and not a religious observance or work of any kind, including baptism, with Titus 3.5 and Ephesians 2.8-9 being but two.

Third, baptism is a public profession of one’s faith in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul dealt with salvation through faith in Christ in Romans 4 and 5. In Romans 6 he dealt with the Christian living his life in Christ. It is in Romans 6.3-6 that Paul showed baptism to be a picture, an illustration if you will, of the Christian’s public identification with Christ’s saving work:

- 3 Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death?
- 4 Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.
- 5 For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also *in the likeness* of *his* resurrection:
- 6 Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with *him*, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.

How does one know that baptism is symbolic of a believer’s salvation experience and not a saving ordinance? Three ways: *First*, because First John 1.7 declares that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from sin, not the water of baptism. *Next*, when Paul used the phrase “like as” in Romans 6.4, we understand that he was using a simile, a figure of speech in which the real is compared with the symbolic. Salvation is real, and baptism is symbolic of salvation and is not salvation itself. *Third*, we know from many other passages that salvation is by grace, with grace and works being incompatible when it comes to salvation, according to Romans 11.6:

“And if by grace, then *is it* no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if *it be* of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.”

Fourth, baptism is a witness of the congregation’s assurance of the salvation of the person being baptized. Assurance of salvation is greatly misunderstood these days, with even most pastors unaware that there are at least two kinds of assurance of salvation taught in the Bible, including the assurance a Christian has about his own relationship with Christ, as well as the assurance other believers have about his relationship with Christ. Second Corinthians 13.5 is written to a congregation and not an individual:

“Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves.”

Paul did not here encourage an individual to examine himself and to prove himself but addressed his remark to the congregation to examine themselves and to prove themselves. Now consider First Peter 3.15:

“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and *be* ready always to *give* an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.”

These two verses address the assurance that *others* have concerning someone’s salvation, with First John 5.13 related to one’s assurance of his salvation:

“These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.”

Though I will present more on this below, baptism is rightly administered when a congregation has a basis for confidence that a baptismal candidate is truly converted, not when an individual insists that he is converted and demands that the congregation baptize him.

Third, THE CUSTODIAN OF BAPTISM

Is the local congregation rightly understood to be the custodian of the ordinances the Lord Jesus Christ gave to the Church? These ordinances are baptism and the communion of the Lord's Supper. Other than the congregation, who has the authority to administer baptism when Matthew 28.19-20 is rightly understood and applied? As well, who other than the congregation has the authority to observe the communion of the Lord's Supper?

Reflect on this for a moment if you will. Writing to Timothy, who was then the pastor in Ephesus, Paul wrote in First Timothy 3.15,

“But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”

Thus, the congregation is not only responsible for upholding the truth of the Christian faith. It is also responsible for seeing that Christ's will and the Church's ordinances are properly administered.

Are congregations perfect in the administration of their responsibilities? No, they are not. From time to time Churches mistakenly authorize the baptism of those who prove to be unsaved. When that happens, and especially when someone in the congregation threatens the good name and testimony of the Church with serious sin, Matthew 18.15-20 is employed to reconcile the sinning member where possible or to eject that sinning person from Church membership when necessary.

Finally, THE CRITERION FOR BAPTISM

From the dawn of the Christian era, Baptists have held the conviction that Church membership should be restricted to those who are born again, with only those who are felt to be true Christians qualified for baptism. That

is why we refer to it as believer baptism.³ That is also why baptism has to be and can only be the immersion of the candidate.⁴ How else could baptism symbolize the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Christian's identification with the Savior's saving work unless the baptism is an immersion in water?

While Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, and Protestants were supposedly baptizing (and typically sprinkling) unsaved infants (Are there saved infants?), Baptists have *always* observed the baptism of those who could intelligently testify of their saving faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, being a Baptist requires that you recognize some level of discernment of another person's spiritual condition.

I mention this because it is politically correct to be so utterly nonjudgmental that many these days question whether anyone can evaluate the spiritual condition of another person. "No one knows but God" is what we frequently hear. However, is that true? Are not Christians forbidden to marry unsaved people? Are not believers commanded not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers?⁵

While not claiming infallibility, Baptists have always held the conviction that a Church's membership is rightly comprised only of regenerate people. Thus, baptism is to be performed only when the congregation has some level of satisfaction that the candidate is genuinely saved. If such a test is recognized by Baptists as valid, then it must be that at least in Baptist circles there is the belief that you can tell who is and who is not saved. Not perfectly, mind you, but passably.

³ Why not believer's baptism, but instead believer baptism? The believer is the subject of the baptism, while the ordinance of baptism is in the custody of the congregation to administer. Therefore, the baptism is not the believer's though the believer is being baptized. A fine point, but more important than many recognize, in my opinion.

⁴ Historical accuracy and honesty demands that we acknowledge that Anabaptists in Europe near the time of the Protestant Reformation had departed from the Scriptural observance of immersing to baptize, misconstruing pouring or sprinkling to be compliance with Christ's command, Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement*, (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2015), page 12 and Malcom B. Yarnell III, editor, *The Anabaptists and Contemporary Baptists*, (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2013), page 171.

⁵ II Corinthians 6.14-17

How do we ascertain the spiritual condition of someone who seeks baptism? Do we just assume that only those who are truly born again will want to be baptized? That is neither wise nor true. How many lost people become Church members if that folly is pursued? Care and caution should not only be exercised when dealing with the lost to bring them to Christ but also when considering as baptismal candidates those who profess to be Christians.⁶

Why must Churches exercise caution? Because it is irresponsible to baptize candidates without proper consideration of their spiritual condition. It is also harmful to baptize someone who is lost; harmful to that individual, harmful to the congregation, and harmful to the cause of Christ. Therefore, confirmation of a real conversion experience should be sought by several means, including personal testimony and corresponding lifestyle. Perfection can never be claimed. It must be insisted that scrutiny cannot be entirely accurate. However, rather than kicking the can down the street for someone else to worry about, wisdom dictates that congregations seek to be faithful to the Lord and helpful to the prospective candidate to do their due diligence and faithfully minister the Gospel and its first ordinance, and to carefully consider the care taken by other congregations from which members are received as transfers. After all, what good does it do to exercise custodial caution of the ordinance of baptism and then to receive as a member someone from a Church that has not done the same? That practice makes as much sense as locking the front door to the house while keeping the back door ajar.

No attempt has been made in this chapter to present a thorough and fully developed understanding of a Church's responsibilities concerning believer baptism. I have only designed to provoke thought and cultivate some interest regarding the matter. When Jesus Christ commanded His apostles to make disciples by going, by baptizing, and by teaching to observe all things whatsoever Christ commanded, He charged them not as individuals but as being those first set in the Church, First Corinthians 12.28.

⁶ Prominent 19th century English Baptist pastor C. H. Spurgeon's care is noted in "Metropolitan Tabernacle Statistics," in *The Sword and the Trowel, Volume One: Years 1865, 1866, 1867* (Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publications, 1975), year 1865, p. 19.

Each time an apostle organized a congregation and ordained spiritual leadership to provide guidance that local Church was fully responsible for carrying out the Great Commission. We in Churches recognize that responsibility as our own. Why are so many congregations self-described as Missionary Baptist Churches? We have an interest in worldwide missions. We not only go ourselves, but we also send others to places we cannot go. Those we are convinced have come to Christ we baptize. Those we baptize, now that they are members of our Church and accountable to our Church's authority, we teach to observe all things Christ commanded.

Thus, the Great Commission is ours and not any individual Christian's in isolation from other Church members. That being so, Baptist Churches are the guardians of the two ordinances: baptism and the communion of the Lord's Supper. That is why congregations decide who they will and will not baptize, how they will be baptized, and when their baptism will take place. It is our conviction that only when this ordinance of believer baptism is performed in the right way, by the right authority, upon the right candidate, can it properly testify of the Gospel and that candidate's identification with Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection from the dead.

Additionally, it matters to us whether fidelity to God's Word was a concern with any congregation a believer comes from with a desire to join us. Was the person who wants to join our congregation Scripturally baptized? It matters to us because we are convinced it matters to the Savior. Alien immersion is a thing.⁷

⁷ "Alien immersion" can be understood as baptism that is performed without Scriptural authority (not a Church in the New Testament sense), without a Scriptural candidate (unconverted baptismal candidate), or without Scriptural mode (baptism is immersion). For a related discussion see Dagg, Second Part, pages 282-286.