

A Biblical View Of Re-Baptism

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With the variety of ways American Folk Religion is invading the North America Evangelical Christian church, it may seem the issue of re-baptism is of little consequence. However, widespread confusion in the church concerning an elementary teaching such as baptism is a harbinger of greater heterodoxy. As part of the elementary teachings about Christ it is a doctrinal error that needs to be addressed. The practice of re-baptism damages the significance of the sacrament, is a grave dishonor to our Lord Jesus and can be a contributing factor in apostasy (Hebrews 6:1-2).

The primary focus of this paper will be on the practice of re-baptism in the case of someone who had previously been baptized as an infant. However, the principles discussed have application on a broad level. In apprehending the elementary teachings about Christ we understand the relationship between baptism, faith, covenant and the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Why Do People Seek Re-baptism?

There are a variety of reasons a person may want to be re-baptized. Yet, there is only one legitimate reason for the practice. Indeed, that reason should not actually be understood as re-baptism. The reference is to someone who was previously baptized in a non-Christian religion such as Mormonism. This is a circumstance where (re)baptism is not just recommended but required. The previous event had no connection to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and therefore should not be considered a legitimate baptism.

The most common reasons people give for re-baptism are focused on their feelings about their Christian baptism, For instance, a person who was baptized as an infant may be concerned their baptism was not true because they did not give assent. A similar reason might be the fact they did not adequately understand the first performance of the sacrament or did not take it seriously even though they were "of age." Others feel they have committed some grave sin (or lived a lifestyle of sin) since undergoing baptism and wish to return to the fold. As understandable as these reasons might be, a desire for re-baptism reveals a lack of insight concerning the purpose of baptism and the nature of the sacrament.

What About Faith And Baptism?

Perhaps the most common argument in favor of re-baptism is to suggest baptism is primarily an expression of faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore if one's faith is not considered genuine at the initial baptism, re-baptism is in order.

Certainly the Bible maintains a relationship between baptism and faith in Jesus (Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, 8:12, 18:8). Nevertheless, a close association does not mean exclusivity or even priority. This becomes clear when we understand that baptism has replaced circumcision as the covenant sign. What was theologically true of circumcision is true of Christian baptism.

Circumcision as the covenant sign originated with Abraham and was given to him sometime after his initial call by God. Every male worshiper of Yahweh, including male infants of believing parents, were circumcised. The practice itself was called the covenant (Genesis 17:9-14, Acts 7:8) and was administered to everyone under the authority of the believing head of the household.

Baptism takes the place of circumcision and is administered to all who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Paul wrote,

You were also circumcised in Him with a circumcision not done with hands, by putting off the body of flesh, in the circumcision of the Messiah. Having been buried with Him in baptism, you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead (Colossians 2:11-12).

As with the rite of circumcision, baptism is administered to Believers and those under their authority (Acts 2:38-39, 10:44-48, 16:15, 30-34, 1 Corinthians 1:16). In both circumcision and baptism, the "visible" faith is on the part of the believing parent.

However, infant baptism does not exclude faith on the part of the recipient. Some may scoff at the idea but it seems John the Baptist exhibited some level of faith while in his mother's womb. The truth is anyone who has children can tell you that babies in the womb are aware of the outside world. If an infant in the womb can display that level of awareness, there is no reason to suggest they cannot be supernaturally given an awareness of Jesus as the Christ. In other words, we cannot dismiss out of hand the idea that babies in a covenant household have been given some measure of faith by God. After all, biblical Christianity understands that faith is always a gift from God, regardless of the age of the recipient. No one generates saving faith from within themselves; it comes from God. Thus, how can we unequivocally say infants who received circumcision under the old covenant or baptism in the new are without saving faith?

Yet because there is no requirement on the part of the infant to make a public profession of faith before his baptism (just as the old covenant infant was not required to make a profession of faith), we must understand that baptism is not primarily about faith but about covenant.

The Worldview Of First Century Christianity

Two principle questions of biblical interpretation are "what did the original author have in mind and what did the message mean to the original audience?" The primary means

we have to discover the answers to these questions is to cast off our modern mindset and place ourselves in the shoes (sandals) of the original participants as much as is possible.

To properly understand the message of the New Testament we must attempt to understand the worldview of the first century church. We cannot forget that the New Testament was not written to us but to people living in a very different culture and under very different circumstances than us. Modern readers may miss the intent of the author because some things are simply assumed and understood by the original audience.

The world conditions that prevailed when the events recorded in Scripture took place and the inspired writers did their work are the setting for what Christians believe to be unique divine revelation. The writers assumed that the original reader was familiar with this setting or that a few words would bring sufficient clarity (see, e.g., Mark 7:3-4). We serious modern readers must not take the first century background lightly. We need to undertake a journey into a land in which we are strangers, the land of those to whom the gospel first came. Then we may return to our time and place, better understanding and better prepared to live and proclaim.¹

One of the primary obstacles for modern Christians in understanding the first century church is our apparent inability to recognize and accept the "Jewishness of earliest Christianity."² Indeed, "the early Christian use of the Old Testament was thoroughly Jewish and had much in common with other Jewish groups."³ This is so because the first century church understood that God was not starting all over again but that the administration of the Abrahamic covenant was now in the hands of Jesus the Christ, the Son of Man.

This is the primary reason the New Testament has so little to say about the recipients of baptism. In the early church, it was understood that an adult who came to faith in Christ would receive the covenant sign. In keeping with the accepted norm, his or her children would receive the covenant sign as well (Acts 11:14, 16:15, 31-34, 18:8, 1 Corinthians 1:16). Thus, the New Testament does not specifically say children of believers should be baptized because it was assumed everyone would understand it was so. Indeed, early Christian apologists and pagan historians alike understood that, "Christians administer baptism to converts and their families."⁴

We have largely forgotten these things in the modern Evangelical world and as a result we sometimes practice a caricature of biblical Christianity. Many of the things taken for granted by the first century church are foreign to a large segment of the modern North American church. For instance, a robust understanding of covenant has largely been abandoned. Hence in the contemporary age of grace, grace is less evident than before! We deny our children the blessings of covenant and exclude them from the covenant signs.

¹ J. Julius Scott, Jr., *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1995), 19.

² E. Earl Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity: Canon and Interpretation in the Light of Modern Research*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 121.

³ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 361.

The Preeminence Of Covenant

Again, the critical issue is not faith but covenant. According to the Bible we participate in same covenant relationship God established with Abraham.

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ like a garment. There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:26-29).

Earlier in the letter Paul made the claim that, *Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say "and to seeds," as though referring to many, but referring to one, and to your seed, who is Christ (Galatians 3:16).*

We may wish to disregard the clear teaching of Paul at this point but suffice it to say that since the seed promised to Abraham was actually Jesus, we are heirs according to the promises given to Abraham through our relationship with him (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:20). Therefore, "believers 'thus belong to Christ,' and since Christ is the true offspring of Abraham (verse 16b), those who thus belong to Christ are collectively also Abraham's true 'issue' and as such individually heirs in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham."⁵

So, the covenant God had established with Abraham found its fruition in Jesus. The first century followers of Jesus did not embrace a whole new religion but were enjoying the fulfillment of the covenant God had made with the patriarchs. Indeed, "the vocation and destiny of ancient Israel, the people of Abraham, have been brought to its fulfillment in the Messiah, particularly in his death and resurrection."⁶ The apostle Paul understood "the people of God and the Messiah of God are so bound up together that what was true of the one was true of the other."⁷ And what is true of Jesus Christ is that he is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant - a covenant that has always included the children of Believers.

None of this negates the fact that an adult who desires baptism must first repent of his sin, confess Jesus Christ as Lord and believe in his heart that God has raised Him from the dead (Matt. 28:19-20, Acts 2:38, 8:12, 35-38, 9:17-18 etc.). However, this is not a new condition of membership. Old Testament saints were likewise required to turn from sin and submit to Yahweh while they anticipated the coming of the Messiah. A believing Jew understood the need for repentance and submission; he also understood the idea of covenant grace. It was understood the outward sign was indicative of inward change. Hence the requirement of the old covenant to "circumcise the heart" (Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6, Jeremiah 4:4). "As circumcision thus signifies inward purification, and was a seal of the righteousness of faith, it

⁵ Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, ed., Gordon D. Fee, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: William B. Erdmann's Publishing Company, 1988), 176.

⁶ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 826.

⁷ Ibid.

was, as to its import and design, identical with baptism."⁸ Obviously, circumcision could be performed only once but one's heart could be renewed.

Moreover, Christian baptism is never primarily about the individual undergoing the rite. "Baptism defines the community of the Messiah's people in the way that circumcision defined the people of Israel according to the flesh. ...The primary point is about the definition of the community, only secondarily the effect on the individual."⁹

In short, baptism is a symbol placed on a person by Christ through his body the church. Baptism says one is a participant in the blessings of the covenant because they are no longer part of the first Adamic race but a member of the eschaton Adam. This is why Paul says the children of a believing parent are considered holy, or set apart (1 Cor 7:14). They are not of the world but are of the kingdom of God. Therefore the sign of the covenant should be given to them.

The Re-Baptism Of The Men At Ephesus

In Acts chapter nineteen we read of Paul's encounter with the twelve men in Ephesus who had been baptized into the baptism of John. Upon making this discovery,

Paul said, "John baptized with a baptism of repentance, telling the people that they should believe in the One who would come after him, that is, in Jesus." When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began to speak in other languages and to prophesy (Acts 19:4-6).

Although this event as been cited as support for the practice of re-baptism it is actually an example of an initial Christian baptism. Clearly these men had not received baptism into Jesus, not even having heard about the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:2). Their baptism had been the baptism of John and "an anticipatory baptism was no longer appropriate or adequate."¹⁰ Therefore Christian baptism was required. Confusion concerning the nature of the various baptisms practiced in first century Judaism and the baptism of John in relationship to Christian baptism is one of the concerns of Hebrews 6:1-6. It is unfortunate we encounter a similar situation today.

But the Bible Doesn't Say We Shouldn't

One argument used to support the idea of re-baptism is the fact that the Bible never says we should not be re-baptized. This is short sighted. For instance, it is equally true the Bible never specifically says a man is prohibited from practicing polygamy. God's Word

⁸ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 1953), 66.

⁹ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 425.

¹⁰ Frederick Fyvie Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, ed., Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 364.

does say if a man aspires to leadership in the church he must be the husband of only one wife (1 Timothy 3:2, 12, Titus 1:6), but that doesn't say polygamy is forbidden. It is also true Jesus indicated God intended one man for one woman in marriage when he said,

"Haven't you read," He replied, "that He who created them in the beginning made them male and female," and He also said: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, man must not separate" (Matthew 19:4-6).

Again, Jesus implied God intended marriage to be between one man and one woman.¹¹ Yet, based upon these words of Christ and other information found in the Bible, the Christian position is just that; a righteous marriage is between one man and one woman for life. Please understand: the Christian church did not arrive at this position because there is an explicit command in the Bible concerning polygamy. Just so with re-baptism.

There is no specific Bible verse that expressly says re-baptism is wrong. As it is with the issue of marriage, we infer from the information provided by God's word that re-baptism is inappropriate. Failure to understand this is evidence of spiritual and theological immaturity.

Clear Cut Objections To Re-baptism

One Death, One Resurrection

The primary argument against the practice re-baptism is the simple fact that when a person undergoes Christian baptism, they are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In his letter to the church in Rome Paul says,

Therefore we were buried with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in a new way of life. For if we have been joined with Him in the likeness of His death, we will certainly also be in the likeness of His resurrection (Romans 6:4-5, see also Colossians 2:11-13).

The first question a person should ask themselves if they are considering re-baptism is, "can Jesus die and rise again more than once?" Note, the question is not "can I die with Jesus and rise again a second time?" The answer in both cases is no but the state of mind that lurks behind a desire for re-baptism is concern about "I." Therefore, if we are going to ask the proper question we need to ask if it is possible for Jesus to die and rise again. And again, the answer is unequivocally no.

This being the case, it should be understood that re-baptism is not baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We cannot be joined with him in the likeness of his

¹¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, ed., Gordon D. Fee, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 716.

death and his resurrection more than one time. *By [God's] will, we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all time* (Hebrews 10:10 CSB, brackets added).¹² Just as a person cannot be unbaptized, they cannot be baptized a second time into the death and resurrection of Christ. The vows of baptism can be broken on the part of the recipient but they cannot be unmade. One who is baptized has been “planted into the death of Jesus in order that you may now live as a renewed human being, planted also into his resurrection life.”¹³ Moreover, “living in accordance with a change of status requires that you recognize it and take steps to bring your actual life into line with the person you have become.”¹⁴ An unwillingness to do so is not evidence of a faulty baptism but of a focus on self rather than Jesus Christ.

At the same time, it is important to understand that when a person is re-baptized they are in fact being baptized into something. As suggested, that something is “I.” Frankly this is quite disconcerting. For, what re-baptism means is that a person is making a public declaration that they are replacing Jesus Christ with themselves. They are saying they place faith in themselves over and above Jesus Christ.

Now, I realize people seeking re-baptism probably have not thought this through. But there is no way around the fact that it is impossible to repeat baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is “I” and the emotions that are given primary importance for “I” that drive a person to consider re-baptism.

Therefore, the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ and his resurrection are not signified in re-baptism. Moreover, re-baptism is not a sign of a covenant relationship to Jesus but in fact becomes significant of a covenant one is making with oneself.

Honor To Parents

The Bible nowhere specifically says it is wrong to re-baptize. However, we have seen this is no license to participate in the practice. The biblical evidence prohibiting the activity is convincing. On the other hand, the Bible very clearly says, *Honor your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise, so that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life in the land* (Ephesians 6:2-3).

Even if there was no scriptural evidence against the practice of re-baptism, this passage alone should give pause to those considering it. As mentioned at the beginning of this missive, one of the common reasons people desire re-baptism is because they received the sacrament as an infant. Any inclination for re-baptism that rests upon the perceived failure of a person’s parents must first wrestle with the implications of this command. In other words, is it honoring to parents to disregard their convictions concerning the covenant and the sign of covenant participation, baptism?

¹² The Greek word, *ephapax*, translated here as “once for all time” and often translated as “once for all” simply means, “upon one occasion, only.” A literal translation of the verse is, *by which will we are having been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once.*

¹³ N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone, Romans: Part One* (London: SPCK, 2004), 102.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The Witness of the Church

It is well-known that the stalwarts of the Reformation were against re-baptism for Roman Catholics who left the church of Rome and embraced the Reformation credo of salvation by grace. Apart from the Anabaptists, this remained the position of the church for centuries. In other words, as long as the marks of the true church were present, even erroneous doctrine could not nullify the efficacy of the baptismal rite.

Furthermore, as it was in the early church, Christians understood and accepted that the children of Believers enjoyed the benefits of the covenant along with their parents. As the Westminster Confession of Faith says, "Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized" and "The sacrament of baptism is but once to be administered to any person."¹⁵

The Real Problem

A Famine of Sound Theology

The real reason for the widespread acceptance of re-baptism in the Christian church is a distaste for good theology. The church at large has come to prefer self-help religion over theologically sound, Bible-based Christianity.

On the shelves of any Christian bookstore, one finds hundreds of Christian self-help books on a plethora of topics and only a handful dealing with theological issues. At times we drift dangerously close to the backwaters of our culture's pragmatism, going so far as to judge sermons on the basis of whether we were offered anything practical or relevant. If the truth taught in a Bible study, devotional time, or sermon does not have immediate implications, we do not embrace it. With our society we glorify "doers" above "thinkers." Thus, the rockstar or the football hero who may be immature and shallow theologically is elevated as a star witness to Christianity. . . . Those who neglect theology may live a shallow, insipid form of Christianity that, in the end, neither affects life nor endures the test of time.¹⁶

In my work I meet numerous professing Christians each week. I am chagrined to find that many of them practice or embrace aberrant beliefs such as universal salvation, necromancy, syncretism, approval of pseudo-Christian religions and so on. Professing Christians and non-Christians alike view a person's belief as an individual preference, adamantly declaring it wrong to judge the value of another man's religion.

This mishmash of belief is not limited to lone-wolf spiritual seekers. Several years ago a friend of mine who attended one of the larger churches in town asked my opinion of the book they were using in their men's "Bible study." The book was the best-selling fiction piece by the Burpos titled, *Heaven Is for Real*. I read the book and was (naively) shocked that

¹⁵ The Westminster Confession of Faith, 28:4, 7

¹⁶ George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, ed. Terry Muck, The NIV Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 59, 60.

the pastor of a large Evangelical Christian church in our city would allow a men's "Bible study" to use a ridiculously unbiblical book as its study guide. In response I wrote a critique for my friend to take back to his "Bible study." I later put the critique into booklet form and sold 11,000 copies on Amazon. I mention that as a lead-in to the fact that I became one of the most hated unknowns on Amazon.com as a result. Most people gave me one star ratings and assured me I was on a fast track to hell because I didn't believe Colton Burpo's tale.

It is not surprising a low view of baptism and a ready acceptance of re-baptism would be found among the potpourri of religion I encounter each week. But as the incident with the men's "Bible study" reveals, a large congregation does not a theologian make. Otherwise, we might find ourselves sitting at the feet of Joel Osteen, notebook and pencil in hand, feverishly transcribing the wealth of theological insight falling from his sainted lips. And so, it is not surprising to find the concept and practice of re-baptism acceptable in many Evangelical churches, some of them large and thriving.

Conclusion

Johnny Lee sang about "looking for love in all the wrong places" and it seems to me this is part of the problem with the modern Evangelical Christian church. Christians often have their hearts and heads turned by loving fellowship unaccompanied by theological substance. This is understandable because all too often, theological substance lacks loving fellowship. In other words, to paraphrase Dionne Warwick, "what the world needs now is love" - and solid theology.

The first step in righting the ship of Christendom is prayer. We should each pray that we will individually obey the Spirit of God through his Word. We should pray the Lord Jesus will guide church leaders into truth and give them the courage to stand for biblical truth. We should pray that God will reform or remove those leaders who currently espouse faulty theology.

We should also pray that there will be more families and churches that couple accurate, Bible-based theology with loving fellowship. Not only that, we should model this very thing. Speak the truth in love, the New Testament tells us (Ephesians 4:15). May God enable us to do so and may God cause his people to grow in the understanding of the truth.