

“In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit”

**The Practice of Christian Baptism
in the
New Testament Church**

International Evangelical Church

Introduction:

All Christians agree that the Bible is God's Word, on which they base all beliefs, practices and conduct. Yet, some interpret the divine Word with unjustifiable pre-determined assumptions. This relates to the claims of some about Christian baptism. Consequently, partisanship, divisions, bitter disputes and blind loyalties have contributed to pride and incessant desires to win followers. Simple believers become confused. Christ's sheep are often dispersed by the controversies. The Church, however, must strive to preserve the unity of faith, the integrity of God's Word and the testimony of longstanding Church history and the rich and blessed Christian heritage.

This statement seeks to clarify to church members and bring to the attention of other fellow Christians some fundamentally clear biblical facts and practices related to the exercise of Christian baptism in the Bible. We are constrained to affirm simple-hearted believers whose baptisms are often faced with unjustifiable doubts or even invalidation. This is not an academic or theoretical treatment of the doctrine; rather it is a concise but full exposition of the practice. Thus, the study strictly conforms to the practice of the New Testament Church in its straightforward simplicity, steering far away from theories, pre-suppositions and empty partisan claims about the meanings of some words. No value whatsoever is in such argumentation for understanding the direct and clear content and practice of baptism in the Scriptures. This is, therefore, an applied presentation which rejects any need for apologetic or academic arguments.

Our church, on the one hand, expresses due respect for believing parents whose consciences bind them to abstain from baptizing their infant children. Fellowship and joint ministry with them in the unity of the body of Christ are full and unhindered. On the other hand, we wish to clarify and assert the firm biblical foundation for other believing parents who enjoy conscientious obligations to have their children baptized. We wish, however, to affirm that our church is not committed to the baptism of children whose parents do not make attested Christian professions. This brief statement does not focus on the important and valid concept of the covenant. Neither does resort to any defense of it. Such is neither justified nor needed in the light of the straightforward New Testament practice of Christian baptism.

What is Christian Baptism?

It is an ordinance commanded by Christ himself as the divine symbol, sign, seal and testimony and a means of grace for the blessing of God's people, setting them apart from the world.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

This ordinance supersedes and ends the purpose of the OT ordinance of circumcision which pointed to that which Christ's atonement fulfilled. The NT describes baptism as the circumcision of Christ *“made without human hands”* (Colossians 2:11-13) Also, the Holy Spirit in Galatians (3:26-29) affirms that Christ by His coming and fulfilling the promise made to Abraham of a *Seed (Offspring)* in whom *“All families of the earth shall be blessed.”* (Genesis 12:1-3, 18:22) Believers of all ethnic backgrounds constitute the new people of God. They are unified by the new ordinance of water baptism which symbolizes the new life promised in Christ through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 3:11, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Ezekiel 36:22-27) The Holy Spirit in Galatians (6:11-18)

asserts that the old ordinance of circumcision no longer had value and that God's true people are the new creation in Christ. They are the Israel of God and enjoy God's peace and mercy as God's true people, unlike those who reject Christ and falsely claim to be God's people by the defunct and invalidated old rite of male circumcision. Christ's apostles and the early Church joyfully obeyed the Lord's instruction by baptizing all new believers along with their households.

What are the Events of Christian Baptism Recorded in the New Testament?

In all 27 books of the New Testament, there are ONLY nine events of baptisms mentioned following the instruction of the Lord Jesus in the "Great Commission." All nine are recorded in the Book of the Acts. One of these is also mentioned again in 1 Corinthians 1:14-17 (Crispus and Gaius and the household of Stephanas)

The first and mother of all Christian baptisms took place on the Day of Pentecost. This must by necessity be considered the foundational example of Christian baptism, in its theological content and its form as well as in its historical and geographical settings. The events and practices of Church on the Day of Pentecost command apostolic authority. It is, therefore, that this shapes the Church's exercise of worship, the ministry of the Word and its administration of baptism.

Following are the nine events of Christian baptism in chronological order.

- 1- Acts 2:41 Three thousand souls on the Day of Pentecost
- 2- Acts 8:10-13 Simon and others in Samaria
- 3- Acts 8:38 The Ethiopian eunuch
- 4- Acts 9:18 Saul of Tarsus
- 5- Acts 10:48 House of Cornelius
- 6- Acts 16:15 Lydia and her household
- 7- Acts 16:33 The Philippian jailer and all those who belonged to him
- 8- Acts 18:8 Crispus and all his household and many at Corinth
- 9- Acts 19:5 The disciples at Ephesus (also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:14-17)

Why Did Circumcision Lose Its Value?

There are two reasons: First, the rite of circumcision involved a bloody aspect which symbolized the divine sacrifice of the promised Seed from the beginning. (Genesis 3:15) Since that promise was realized in Christ's death on the cross, the symbolic anticipation ended and the rite lost its temporary purpose. So, a new meaningful ordinance was imperative to replace the symbol of belonging to God's people, an ordinance that relevantly reflects the true meaning of what the Lord Jesus accomplished by his atoning sacrifice on the cross.

Second, the Jews who reject Christ continue to practice the rite of circumcision and insist on waiting for a different "Messiah." The new community of believers, however, of Jews and all ethnic groups, separates itself from the old Israel, enjoying sure saving faith in Christ, the one and only true Messiah of God. They are set apart by a new rite signifying God's saving work, planned for and accomplished by the blessed Triune God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As the Passover meal symbolized the body and blood of the Redeemer was replaced by Christ himself commanding the ordinance of the Lord's Supper at the realization of the promised atonement. Likewise, the

Lord Jesus instructed the Church to use of water, symbolizing the cleansing power of His blood. So, baptism confirms the benefits of Jesus' complete saving work which began by His incarnation and was completed by his death and victorious resurrection, ascension and enthronement on His heavenly seat. From there He exercises authority over all things and also serves as the one and only High Priest qualified to be the divine mediator for God's people.

What is the Relation of Baptism to Salvation?

Baptism is neither a salvation rite nor the means to obtain salvation. Rather it is a symbol, a sign, a seal and a testimony for the divine salvation from sin and from the just divine judgment sinners deserve. First, it confirms that humanity needs the work of One True Living Triune God which alone provides them with forgiveness of sin and cleansing from it. Second, it confirms that the Son of God, in His mercy, love and rich grace, powerfully, wisely and righteously accomplished that salvation completely and sufficiently through His incarnation. He added to his divine nature a full human nature. As the New Adam, He lived a perfect life in obedience to God's holy will, in His humiliation, suffering, death, burial, resurrection, ascension and enthronement as well as in his continued ministry of mediation on behalf of His people. Third, baptism confirms that the Holy Spirit does plant and establish a new spiritual nature in believers which enables them to live obedient lives to God's commands.

Water baptism, in itself, however, saves nobody whether the person baptized is an adult or a child. In fact, many of those baptized, even as adults after making profession of faith, prove later that they never enjoyed the Lord's salvation. Their temporary faith was based on human persuasion and a will derived from a corrupt human nature. An example of such from the apostolic age was Simon the magician. (Acts 8:9-24)

Is Baptism a Human Testimony or a Divine Gift?

Baptism in God's Word points to a gift from the Lord to believers. It is a testimony and certification from Him to them that He is faithful in fulfilling His saving promises to cancel all their debts and gift them with life eternal, preserving this eternal inheritance prepared by the loving Father, bought by the redeeming Son and kept by the life-giving Spirit. Baptism, therefore, is the Lord's gift to us to assure and comfort us that He has incorporated us into His fold. It is not our testimony to the world that we have entered the divine fold. The testimony of baptism is to what God has done and continues to do and NOT to what humans do or announce that they have done. Even though it is natural for the world to take note and perhaps even learn lessons from the Church's practice of Christian baptism, the main purpose of baptism is the blessing of the Lord's people and not attracting the world to the event.

For Whom Is Baptism?

From the dawn of its glorious beginning on the great Day of Pentecost, the Christian Church clearly understood the Lord's instruction to mean that all believers and their households enjoy the new sign, seal and divine testimony of water baptism. This affirms the truth and sufficiency of the salvation of the Lord Jesus.

Are the Children of Believers to be Baptized?

The Church did not need any instruction for the baptism of the children of believers. The matter is viewed in the New Testament as a clear and obvious practice of duty and of divine right. The divine promises of salvation

were not just prophetic. The apostolic declaration on the Day of Pentecost applied the prophecy of Joel 2:28 not only to adult believers but also to their children and children's children (Acts 2:38-41) :

'And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself." And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.'

It is clear that the promised salvation is more important than that which signifies it in water baptism. Is it therefore reasonable to deprive the children of believers of the external sign of the saving promise given to them? This is exactly what called on the apostles and the first Christian Church to baptize the whole household of new believers without exception. The Holy Spirit did not state, for instance, that new believers were baptized with all the adult members of their household. Nor did He state that they were baptized with all members of their household, except for infants. (Acts 10:48, 16:15-33, 18:8, 1 Corinthians 1:16)

Furthermore, the Holy Spirit in His record of the first event of Christian baptism on the great Day of Pentecost, spoke of *"three thousand souls."* He did not indicate whether they were male or female or adult or young "souls." None can claim that the Bible in the Old or New Testaments teaches that children do not enjoy "immortal souls" before they arrive at the age of accountability. It is therefore clear from what is divinely inspired that every time new believers, male or female, had families or children, the apostles confidently baptized them all. There is not a single mention in the whole of the New Testament for making an exception in baptism of the children of believers. There is no indication whatsoever that the apostles instructed the churches to baptize only adult believers who had households. There is not a single hint that members of households were baptized with the exception of infants. As children of believers in the Old Testament were considered entitled to the sign of entering into divine covenant by means of circumcision, the children of believers in the New Testament are clearly also entitled to receive the new sign of entering into the divine covenant through baptism.

This list shows us how the apostles and the early Church viewed and practiced the ordinance of baptism. It is clear that children were not excluded. The Ethiopian eunuch and Saul of Tarsus, who had no children, were baptized alone. For baptisms in Samaria and Ephesus no detail is given. As to the baptism of three thousand "souls" on the Day of Pentecost, there is no indication that children below the age of accountability were not included, unless one claims that infant children enjoy no "souls." The rest of the baptisms recorded by the Holy Spirit in God's Word clearly indicate that households were included. A direct divine command is not needed for the baptism of children of believing parents because the whole of the inspired Old and New Testaments Scriptures are consistent in their teaching on this and on all subjects. The Holy Spirit did not allow a single insinuation that forbids or objects to the baptism of the children of believing parents.

What about Adult Baptism?

It is true that the New Testament teaches the necessity of faith as a prerequisite for baptism as Christ says in Mark 16:16: *"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."* The Lord Jesus at another occasion expressed the order in reverse when he said to Nicodemus in John 3:5, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."*

This is an important statement which should not be disputed. It applies to all new believers, Jew and Gentiles, who had no previous Christian background. On the Day of Pentecost, baptism clearly included Jews and others. In fact, the apostles themselves (and other disciples) had enjoyed only John's baptism of repentance in preparation for the coming of the promised Messiah but had not received Christian baptism prior to the Day of Pentecost. It is assumed that the Holy Spirit is thus teaching that only believers are to be baptized and that no children outside the household of believing parents is to be baptized.

Is "Dedication" a Legitimate Alternative to Baptism?

There is not a single basis in the Word of God for the 'dedication' ceremony which some use as a temporary alternative to the baptism of children. Scriptures quoted for this practice applied only to the firstborn males, who were offered in vows by their parents for the Lord's service (usually in the Old Testament temple). The dedication of such children usually took place when they reached the age of 12. Yet, such male children had already received the Old Testament sign of circumcision on the eighth day after their birth.

How is Christian Baptism Administered?

The New Testament was originally recorded for the most part in the Greek language. The Greek word 'baptizo' translated 'baptism' in English was used its different forms by the Greeks to describe a variety of washings, cleanings and religious purifications. It is also used in Luke 11:38 in reference to the washing of hands before eating. So it was translated in English not as the 'baptizing' of hands, but as the 'washing' of hands. At that time, the method of hand-washing was by the pouring of water on the hands before entering a house to partake of a meal. So 'baptizo' is used in the New Testament in symbolic reference to the cleansing from sin. In Matthew 15:2 and Mark 7:4-5 the same Greek word 'baptizo' is used for the washing of persons or utensils. In both cases the method was by the pouring of water. The use of the word "baptizo" was not exclusively used for the Christian rite of baptism. In fact, it was widely used in writings of classical philosophers and other ancient Greek writers, including those contemporary to the period of the apostolic age. In all its usage, it did not mean more than purifying or cleansing by water. There is no indication whatsoever that the method of immersion was used.

In the Old Testament there are a good number of references to the symbolic spiritual washing of the whole body by merely sprinkling with or pouring of water. In the Septuagint (The canonical Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament.) the Greek word 'baptizo' was used to refer to a type of baptism specifically practiced for priests. (Leviticus 14 & 15, Numbers 8:5-7) This was similar to the baptism of John in preparation for Christ's coming. It is also important to note that the prophet Ezekiel spoke of the salvation in the promised Messiah, "*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.*" (Ezekiel 36:25)

In the same way, we see in Isaiah 52:15 a prophetic reference to the Great Commission, including the ordinance of baptism. In that reference the Hebrew speaks of "sprinkling" many nations.

Does "**Buried with Him in Baptism**"(Romans 6:4, Colossians 2:12) Refer to Immersion Under Water?

There are several reasons why this phrase could not refer to a literal immersion under water.

First, the burial of the dead at that time did not take place in the popular Western way, with the corpse being buried by dirt under the surface of the earth. Tombs were built above ground. Even the bodies of Jesus and of Lazarus were wrapped in cloths and laid in tombs above the surface of the ground, not covered by dirt. The Gospel, without hesitation, describes that form of burial as true and complete.

Second, the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:1-2 wrote: *“our fathers were all under the cloud; and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea”*

Obviously, the cloud covered the heads of the Hebrews in the wilderness as they crossed on a dry path through the sea. How could this, therefore, mean a literal immersion in water? The fact is that the ones who were immersed in water were Pharaoh and his Egyptian host who rejected the Lord’s command for the deliverance of His people. Furthermore, in 1 Peter 3:20-21 the Holy Spirit in speaking of the saving of Noah’s family in the ark, connect that to salvation and says: *“Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as removal of dirt from the body...”* The fact is that rain water poured down heavily from the sky on the ark, yet it remained afloat and was never fully immersed in the flood. Thus, the Lord preserved the lives of eight souls while the rest of humanity were immersed under the waters of the flood and perished.

Third, it is absolutely imperative for Christians to keep in mind that the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which water baptism signifies, never was described either in Old Testament prophecy nor in New Testament fulfillment as immersion. Rather, it is described as pouring or falling on (Acts 10:44). This and the rest of the Word of God provide no justification for the insistence of some on the mode of immersion in water baptism.

Fourth, some insist that the expressions in Acts 8:38-39 *“went down into to the water”* and *“came up out of the water”* indicate that the Ethiopian eunuch was baptized by immersion. Yet, these two expressions in no way imply literal immersion. The emphasis of the passage is on the eunuch’s observation from up in his chariot of the existence of a watering hole in the desert. Otherwise, the text should have said more, such as reference to the two men becoming all wet and changing clothes. Yet, the simplicity of the text did not refer to any such activity before or after his baptism.

Fifth, it is important to realize that immersion can never be deduced from the simplicity of the practice of the New Testament Church. The very foundation of Christian baptisms on the Day of Pentecost, (the mother of all baptisms) annuls that assumption. The baptism of “three thousand souls” in the vicinity of the temple in Jerusalem could not have been carried out by immersing three thousand bodies even if 12 apostles each was assigned to immerse up to 250 persons. This would have required many, many hours plus thousands of towels and changes of clothes. The insistence of some on immersion while claiming that the baptism of the Day of Pentecost was merely an exception to the rule of practice does not stand up to reason or logic. The event was, in fact, the most important foundation of Christian baptism. This even of baptism, with all recorded details, represents the indisputable apostolic example. In fact, the apostles themselves experienced then Christian baptism for the first time.

Sixth, in the Book of Acts, new believers often met in homes and other places with no lakes, rivers, pools or canals. Even if homes of new believers such as Cornelius, Lydia and the Philippian jailor had swimming pools there is no indication whatsoever that immersions which required changing of clothes of both the baptized and ones doing the baptizing would have needed.

Seventh, in John's preparatory baptism of repentance, Jesus insisted on experiencing to identify with the sinners He came to save. The expression in Mark 1:10 about Jesus "*ascending*" from the water did not mean that he had been immersed in the water. The geographical context of John's ministry was down by the shores of the river Jordan. John was certainly not standing soaking in the water all day calling on thousands to come one by one to be baptized by immersion in the river. He chose the strategic crossroads in the wilderness where travelers came down to rest in the shade of the trees, growing by the water. It was a golden opportunity to proclaim the message of repentance to the many passersby attracted by his unusual attire. His voice ascended from the river shore (Mark 1:5) as he called on them to repent and sprinkled them with water. The assumption some religious paintings evoke by showing John standing immersed in the water baptizing has no practical justification whatsoever. It is unrealistic to think that he could soak day after day immersing countless hundreds of people one by one in the water.

Can Christian Baptism Be Invalidated or Repeated?

"There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." (Ephesians 4:4-6)

The Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:1-6 warns against wrong attitudes which lead to estrangements and divisions within the body of believers. He exhorts believers to exercise humility and longsuffering in fellowship with one another. In that context, he called on Christians to preserve spiritual unity, emphatically stating that the unity of believers is integrally tied up with the unity of the Godhead in the Holy Trinity and the unity of the Christian faith and its expression in the unity of baptism symbolizing Christ's gift of faith and new life. Thus, the repetition of baptism is apostolically rejected out of hand. For the unity of baptism is of the unity of the Lord in the Holy Trinity and the unity of the Christian faith in the Holy Scriptures.

So, regardless of the method of administering baptism (by sprinkling, pouring or immersing) and regardless of the amount of water used and regardless of the age the person receiving baptism (adult, child or infant) and regardless of the identity of the one who administers the baptism, his ecclesiastical status or denominational affiliation, any baptism in the name of the One and Only True Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is one and only one. The Lord designed it as the portion of believers and all their households. Therefore, casting doubt on any Trinitarian Christian baptism or demanding its repetition violate the plain teaching of the Word of God. Thus, repetitions of any baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity are in fact invalid and void of any spiritual value. The spiritual blessing and the value of Christian baptism are intrinsically sourced from being carried out in the name of the blessed Triune God and not by the amount of water used or its timing or the identity of the administering officer.

In Christian baptism there is a wonderful divine declaration that it is God who richly and graciously incorporates those separated from Him by sin into the body of Christ and thus declaring them as His covenant people. This is the heart of the Gospel which offers God's saving grace in Christ.

"Glory be to Father, Son and Holy Spirit"