

The Evolution of Baptism

Jesus asked some fellow Jews, "Why do you break the command of God, for the sake of your tradition?" (Matthew 15:3). He could ask the same question today concerning baptism, which is clearly a command of God: "Repent and be baptized each 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" (Acts 2:38). Pretty straight forward, you would think, but some traditions do not baptize, they "sprinkle" or "pour."

The word "baptize" is not an English translation; it is a transliteration. A transliteration is a representation (of letters or words) of one language in the corresponding characters (alphabet) of another language. In this case, the Greek word "baptizo" is made to sound English, "baptize." The Greek word means, "plunge, dip, immerse," not "sprinkle" or "pour." Properly translated Acts 2:38 would read, "Repent and be immersed each one you..." "Pouring" started much later to accommodate inconveniences like deathbed conversions, but Scripture made no such accommodation.

Many break God's command concerning immersion for the sake of tradition. Because alternative practices have become so common we cannot imagine them being wrong, but biblical truth is not determined by modern head counts; it is determined by the words written in the Bible. The effect of following traditions, which contradict those words, is the same today as when Jesus confronted his fellow Jews: "You nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition" (Matthew 15:6). The evolution of baptism has diminished the authority of God's word in favor of the authority of man's word. To which are you committed?

Human tradition, not Scripture, is the only authority for infant baptism. A weak defense using examples for the practice is sought in the so-called "household conversions" in the book of Acts (e.g., 16:31-34). However, this assumes there were infants in the household, which is never stated, and it overlooks certain facts in the context. Those who were baptized heard (and presumably understood) the word of the Lord spoken to them and they believed it (see Mark 16:16)! Infants?

The earliest scriptural defense was found in John 3:5 where Jesus stated, "no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and Spirit." "No one" was believed to include infants. But Jesus spoke only of those who needed the new birth, sinners. In the New Testament, the new birth is described as a free-will decision of a sinner (not some 'sponsor') to repent, die to self, stop being enslaved to sin, and begin serving God (Acts 2:38; Romans 6). Infants?

In the fourth century Augustine developed a theological defense that supposedly provided a need for infant baptism in the so-called doctrine of 'original sin.' However, he based his argument on an erroneous Latin translation of the original Greek in Romans 5:12. Whatever that passage means, it does not contradict clear passages that teach people need baptism because of their own sins, not Adam's (Acts 2:38; 22:16). Infants?

Infants hearing and believing? Infants enslaved to sin, repenting, dying to self, serving God? Infants responsible for someone else's sin? Do these make sense to you? Tradition or the word of God? Which do you trust?

The evolution of modern ideas about the purpose of baptism started much later than the practices of sprinkling and infant baptism, and arguments given in support are even more convoluted.

It takes all sorts of theological and grammatical gymnastics to circumvent the obvious meaning of the many passages on why a believer is immersed. Consider a few examples: "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5), "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16), "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" (Acts 2:38), "Be baptized and wash your sins away" (Acts 22:16). Why be baptized? To enter God's kingdom, to be saved, for forgiveness/washing away of your sins, to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Read these passages and Romans 6:1-4, Galatians 3:27, Colossians 2:11-12, and 1Peter 3:21 in their contexts and see for yourself. But try to read these passages without the theological lens of a presupposed belief system. Let Scripture speak, not your tradition.

The necessity of baptism for salvation was not debated until the sixteenth century during the Reformation. Even then Luther or Calvin didn't question it. It was Ulrich Zwingli, a Swiss reformer, who reduced the importance of baptism to an outward sign of the salvation that supposedly had already occurred in the believer. Zwingli was influenced by considerations other than the Scripture. We all are to some degree, but it might prove refreshing to say no more or less than what God said in his word.