

The Ditches—Once Again

In our survey of the biblical instruction related to church government (see Lesson 3, “Elders and Deacons”), we noted that two thousand years of church history teach us an unmistakable lesson: Christians are commonly pulled into two ditches: *anti-authoritarianism* or *over-complexity*. Keeping on the straight and narrow road of fidelity to biblical instruction is exceedingly difficult.

On the one hand, the lure of personal liberty draws many into the ditch on the left. Here, “everyone does what is right in his own eyes.” What the church is, how it is to worship, and how it is to be governed, is determined by personal preference and cultural relativity. But the ditch on the right also claims victims. The lure of complexity—where traditions not only accumulate but increasingly eclipse the truths they were intended to promote—always finds a soft spot in the human heart. As Robert Saucy states, “History teaches that in matters of ritual it has always been easier for the church to add something than to take it away” (*The Church in God’s Program*, 205).

The testimony of history is certainly clear on the danger and consequences of these two ditches with respect to church governance. But it is even clearer about these dangers with regard to the Christian rite of *baptism*. Within Christendom, few issues see as many extremes and cause as much disagreement as this one.

To begin our survey of the topic, **a summary definition of “baptism” is helpful**. For this we turn to the doctrinal statement of Grace Community Church (accessible at <https://www.gracechurch.org/about/doctrinal-statement>). As part of its summation of the doctrine of the church, the statement related to baptism reads as follows:

We teach that two ordinances have been committed to the local church: baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:38–42). Christian baptism by immersion (Acts 8:36–39) is the solemn and beautiful testimony of a believer showing forth his faith in the crucified, buried, and risen Savior, and his union with Him in death to sin and resurrection to a new life (Romans 6:1–11). It is also a sign of fellowship and identification with the visible Body of Christ (Acts 2:41–42).

To further guide our survey, we must identify five fundamental characteristics about water baptism.

I. It is ordained by Jesus Christ.

We must begin by asking, **why is baptism important?** Because **Jesus Christ**, the Builder and Head of the church (Matt 16:18; Eph 1:22–23; Col 1:18), **has commanded the rite of baptism**. Because the Lord of the church has Himself ordained this practice, Christians must think deeply about it and treat it as an issue of primary importance.

Since Christ has commanded the practice of baptism, we refer to baptism—together with the Lord’s Supper—as an **“ordinance”**—because it was **ordained by Jesus Christ**. In fact, He institutes baptism as part of the Great Commission:

- **Matthew 28:18–20** – “And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’”

Furthermore, the apostles of Jesus Christ—the select group of men endowed with Christ’s authority—also commanded the practice of baptism in their teaching and writing ministries. This *ordinance*—from Christ through His apostles—is recognized by the early church as incontrovertible. See especially **Acts 2:38, 41 and Acts 10:47–48**; but see also **Acts 8:12, 36–38; 9:17–18; 16:14–15, 31–33; 18:8; 19:5**.

“The idea of an unbaptized Christian is simply not entertained in the New Testament.”

—F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 77

Referring to baptism as an “**ordinance**” is quite different from referring to it as a “**sacrament**”—a term commonly found in Christendom today. What is the difference? The term “sacrament” is one that arose in conjunction with the *complexity creep* that occurred in the post-apostolic era. The term is drawn from the Latin word *sacramentum*, which Jerome (AD 343–420) used in his translation of the Vulgate (AD 405) when he translated the word “**mystery**” (μυστήριον, *mystērion*) in Ephesians 5:32 (“This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church”). Misunderstanding the apostle Paul’s intent in that text, Jerome believed that Paul taught that marriage between a husband and wife was a “mystery” in that it brought about a special impartation of divine grace. Thus, *marriage* was to be regarded as *a sacrament*. Over time, the Roman Catholic Church proceeded to add six other practices to its list of sacraments: *baptism, confirmation, eucharist, penance, holy orders, and last rites*.

Consequently, Roman Catholics contend that baptism—as a *sacrament*—imparts divine grace to the recipient and makes him holy. Catholic theologians call this *ex opera operato*, or “**by the work performed**” in itself. In other words, regardless of the state of the recipient, the rite of baptism—for the Roman Catholic—is sufficient on the basis of the act itself to regenerate the recipient. No conscious expression of faith is necessary. Thus, infants can be baptized.

The Protestant Reformers vehemently pushed back against this understanding of baptism and regeneration. Nonetheless, some Protestants continue to use the term “sacrament” to refer to baptism. For example, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* of 1646 states, “Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ . . .” (28.1). But due to the history and ambiguity of the term, it is best to avoid the language of “sacrament” altogether and use “ordinance” instead. There is no biblical warrant for the term “sacrament,” particularly with respect to baptism. Conversely, the language of *ordinance* is superior, since it captures the essence of Christ’s command. This preference in terminology is captured by the *London Baptist Confession of Faith* of 1689, which states, “**Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ . . .**” (29.1).

II. It is not salvific in nature.

The next question to answer is, **what does baptism do to me?** Does the one who receives the rite of baptism undergo some kind of *change* in the act? In short, *no*. According to the teaching of the New Testament, **baptism does nothing to change the nature of the recipient**.

Of course, many within Christendom believe that it does, espousing various forms of a theology known as *baptismal regeneration*. “Baptismal regeneration” is the belief that baptism “is a means by which God imparts saving grace; it results in the remission of sins. By either awakening or strengthening faith, baptism effects the washing of regeneration” (Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3.1090). For Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, the rite of *baptism alone* is sufficient for spiritual awakening or regeneration. For some Protestants (some Lutherans, those of the denomination known as the Church of Christ), *faith* must be joined to *baptism* for the work of regeneration to be completed (*faith + baptism = regeneration*).

The common proof-text is **Acts 2:38**, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins . . .” But adding *baptism* as a necessity for salvation is erroneous for several reasons.

First, the view of baptismal regeneration misinterprets Peter’s language in Acts 2:38. A closer look at the grammar indicates a shift in commands: “**Repent** [2nd person plural], and each of you **be baptized** [3rd person singular].” This shift indicates that Peter did not view the two commands as synonymous. At the same time, Peter did not see the need to separate them. Why? Peter expected *the response of faith* as a given. He could not speak of conversion without speaking about baptism because the symbol is necessarily linked to the reality. The reality—salvation—naturally gives way to its symbol—baptism. As John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue state, “Peter therefore challenged [his hearers] to demonstrate the genuineness of their repentance by publicly identifying with the Lord Jesus through baptism” (*Biblical Doctrine*, 785). They continue, “Though baptism does not produce salvation, it is closely associated with it (cf. Eph 4:5). In the book of Acts, those who believed were baptized immediately (Acts 2:41; 8:38; 9:18; 10:48; 18:8; 19:1-5), indicating that it should closely follow a genuine profession of faith” (786). Indeed, Luke shows this connection when describing the people’s response: “So then, those **who had received his word** were baptized” (**Acts 2:41**).

Second, the view of baptismal regeneration *ignores Peter's own words later in the conversion of Cornelius*. Not long after his famous Pentecost sermon (Acts 2), Peter finds himself in the home of the Gentile God-fearer, Cornelius. What Luke records about that interaction, and Cornelius' conversion in particular, is crucial: see **Acts 10:44–48; also 11:17**. Peter clearly recognized that Cornelius and those with him who *believed in the gospel* received the gift of salvation on the basis of faith alone, apart from baptism. Baptism was then the acknowledgement that the gift had been received.

Third, the view of baptismal regeneration *rejects Scripture's emphasis that salvation is always by grace alone*. The message of the gospel is clear: Salvation is purely by grace through faith; it never requires nor involves human acts of obedience. For example, see **Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:5; Ephesians 2:8–9; 1 Peter 1:23**.

III. It is symbolic of spiritual realities.

If baptism does not change the one who receives it, **what function does baptism play?** In sum, **the practice of baptism depicts in an external, concrete, and vivid manner specific spiritual realities**. Sadly, in the reaction to baptismal regeneration, many have dismissed water baptism as optional or even unnecessary. As Peter Goeman writes, “Unfortunately, we have lost sight of the significance of baptism in the church at large. We have differentiated salvation and baptism so much that baptism has become a secondary issue in many circles” (“Does Baptism Save You?”).

Each of the Lord's ordinances—baptism and the Lord's Supper—has a visible sign ascribed in order to draw attention to greater spiritual realities. For baptism, the sign is *submerging into and emerging from water*. This symbolic act closely represents three spiritual realities of salvation.

First, baptism pictures the recipient's identification with Jesus Christ. This can be seen in a general sense with the use of the word “baptism” in 1 Corinthians 1:12–15 and 10:1–2 with reference to belonging to “Paul” or to “Moses.” But more directly, it is important to note the language of baptizing “**in the name of Jesus**” in texts like Acts 2:38; 8:16; and 19:5. This phrase implies *union* or *identity* with Jesus Christ. Thus, the act of baptism *symbolically portrays* that the one baptized belongs to Jesus Christ and is in submission to all that He represents.

Second, baptism pictures the message of saving faith. By baptism, the one baptized portrays what he believes. As Saucy describes it, baptism is “faith embodied in act” (*The Church in God's Program*, 198). How is this so? On the one hand, **immersion into the water** represents death and burial *to sin*. On the other hand, **emergence from the water** represents resurrection to new life (see esp. Rom 6:1–11). Moreover, baptism depicts externally what was accomplished spiritually through the new birth—the *washing of regeneration* (see 1 Cor 6:11; Titus 3:5; Heb 10:22; 1 Pet 1:21).

Third, baptism pictures solidarity with Christ's body. The act of baptism expresses the recipient's acknowledgement that he now is part of a community. He recognizes a spiritual unity with the church, for if he has been united to Christ as the Head, he is automatically united to all the members of Christ's body as well. In one sense, the act of baptism uniquely expresses the *unity* of the universal body of Christ (Matt 28:19–20; Eph 4:4–6). From the very start of the church age until its end, **water baptism is to function as the universal sign of adherence**. Practically, the act of baptism also provides a discernable means for *identifying converts* and *counting them as members* in the local church (see Acts 2:41).

IV. It is intended for born-again believers.

Since baptism is so important, it raises the question, **for whom is baptism intended?** According to the instruction and practice described in the New Testament, **baptism is intended for those who have professed faith in Jesus Christ**.

There are many who reject *baptismal regeneration* but who still believe that baptism can be administered to children. Those who take this position are known as “**paedobaptists**” (the term is based on the Greek word *παῖς/παιδός*, *pais/paidos*, which means “child”). According to paedobaptists, the children of believing parents are to be baptized not *for regeneration*, but to *make them members of the covenant community*, and thus “heirs of the all-comprehensive covenant-promises of God” (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 683). Paedobaptists base their position on three fundamental arguments: (1) the “**household passages**” in the NT where entire “households” are baptized (e.g., Acts 10:34–48; 11:14; 16:11–15; 1 Cor 1:16); (2) the connection that baptism supposedly has with *circumcision*; in strict

continuity with the rite of circumcision (which marked an infant as a citizen of the Israelite covenant community), baptism also marks an infant as a member of the Christian community; and (3) the *tradition of the church*, particularly from the fourth century AD onward. However, each of these arguments falls short.

First, not once do the “household passages” actually mention infants or children. Instead, all the commands to “be baptized” are issued to those capable of hearing and believing (Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12, 36–38; 9:18; *10:44–48; 16:30–33; 18:8; 19:4–5). As such, “infant baptism” becomes an argument from silence.

Second, if baptism functioned like **circumcision**, the apostles would have argued against the Judaizers at the Jerusalem Council (see Acts 15) by saying that baptism *replaced* circumcision. However, the apostles never argue that way but make their case against the necessity of circumcision for Gentile believers along completely different lines. The word “baptism” does not even appear in the context of the Jerusalem Council.

Third, that infant baptism was the practice of the early church is a stretch. The earliest accepted practices of infant baptism trace to the 3rd or 4th centuries AD, to the era when the error of baptismal regeneration was spreading. Prior to that time, **believer’s baptism was the uncontested practice of the primitive church.**

Conversely, those who believe that only professing believers should be baptized (i.e., “believer’s baptism”) are known as “**credobaptists**”—the term based on the Latin word *credo*, which means “I believe.” This view arises naturally out of the New Testament language about baptism. As Saucy again states, “It is impossible . . . to find this practice [paedobaptism] in the New Testament church or in the earliest records of subsequent church history. . . . The consistent pattern of New Testament practice was hearing, believing, and being baptized” (*The Church in God’s Program*, 199).

V. It is accomplished by immersion.

The final question is, *how is baptism to be practiced?* We can answer this question quickly. Consistent with New Testament language and the symbolism it intends to portray, **baptism is to be administered by immersion.** Three *modes* of baptism have been practiced at various times in church history: (1) immersion; (2) pouring; and (3) sprinkling. But the term translated in the New Testament as “baptize” is the term βαπτίζω (*baptizō*), which unambiguously means “**to immerse, submerge**” (see esp. Acts 8:38–39 and “into” and “out of”). To add to this, the symbolism that the practice of baptism communicates (see III. Above) requires the picture of *immersion*—not pouring or sprinkling.

For Discussion

1. Why do we refer to water baptism as an “ordinance”? Why is the word “sacrament” not a helpful term?
2. What does water baptism symbolize? List some common misunderstandings of water baptism.
3. Summarize the three arguments against the false teaching of *baptismal regeneration*.
4. What is the difference between “paedobaptism” and “credobaptism”? In simple terms, with the aid of several NT texts, explain why “credo-baptism” is the biblical form of baptism.
5. Have you been baptized upon the profession of your faith? If you profess faith in Jesus Christ, what are your reasons for not following through on what He has ordained as an essential sign of discipleship?
6. What are the blessings you have received from observing the baptism of others?

For Further Study

1. **Memorize:** Matthew 28:19–20
2. **Read (intermediate):** “Baptism,” pages 782–786 in *Biblical Doctrine*, by John MacArthur & Richard Mayhue.
3. **Read (advanced):** *The Church in God’s Program*, by Robert Saucy, pages 191–213.
4. **Read (advanced):** *The Baptism Debate: Understanding and Evaluating Reformed Infant Baptism*, by Peter Goeman.
5. **Write:** Take time this week to compile an updated version of your testimony of conversion. It should include three parts: (a) acknowledgement with appropriate detail of your lost state before Christ; (b) details of hearing and believing in the gospel at conversion; and (c) an account of things that have been transformed in your life as a result of conversion.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.

Next meeting: October 7, 7pm – “God’s Design for Dads—The Leadership of a Dad” (Chris Hamilton)