

COLOSSIANS 2:8-14

THE BIBLICAL MODE OF BAPTISM

“See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”¹

Undoubtedly, during these past weeks, I have explored the issue of baptism more thoroughly than some will think wise. Modern sensibilities argue that we should avoid addressing issues that discriminate or that may cause personal discomfort. Insisting upon immersion as the biblical model for baptism does undoubtedly discriminate between Christians and does cause discomfort. However, I do not seek artificial unity based upon the avoiding disagreement; rather, I seek unity growing out of the shared commitment to the Word of the Living God. As I speak week-by-week, I do not seek the approval of man; rather, I seek the approval of Him who appointed me to this service of teaching and preaching His Word.

Whenever I address the subject of baptism, I know that I am addressing some who hold to hoary traditions held dear by their parents, and by their parents before them. It is fair to say that much, if not most, of Canadian Christendom performs initiatory rites that are at considerable variance with Scripture. The traditions of most communions in Canada consider baptism to be a sacrament—an act that conveys grace. Most communions practise a rite for infants that they identify as baptism. Most communions speak of sprinkling water, or of pouring a small amount of water onto the head, as the initiatory rite of the Christian Faith. However, naming an act “baptism” does not legitimatise that act or transform the act into what is presented in the Word of God.

Paul penned a polemic to confront the error of false teachers (probably Gnostics) that were infiltrating the churches of the Lycus Valley at that time. That letter, which we have received as the Letter to the Colossians, endeavours to equip Christians to stand firm in the Faith of Christ the Lord. Especially does this letter address the error of believing that human tradition can or should supplant the will of God.

In one place in the letter, as the Apostle confronts an insidious error that attempted to substitute human tradition and philosophy for the teaching of the Spirit of God, he refers to the act of baptism. Though he mentions the rite in passing, the manner in which he speaks makes it apparent that he expected that his readers would be in full agreement with the intent of the ordinance. Join me in studying **COLOSSIANS 2:8-14**.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

TRADITION CONTRA SCRIPTURE — “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.” As members of this fallen race, we tend cling to what is familiar and comfortable, regardless of truth. Error, once it has become entrenched, is comfortable. Even a little bit of error can become so familiar that at last it is so thoroughly entrenched that it cannot be removed.

The Apostle was concerned lest his readers slip into error through embracing human tradition in the place of godly teaching. The finest human philosophy cannot ascend to the heights of divine revelation. Whenever someone speaks of matters that affect my eternal welfare, I do not want to hear their fatuous fallacies; I want to hear from one who is able to inform me of the will of God. Christ died for our sins; He was buried and He rose from the grave for my justification. If I listen to anyone, let it be the Risen Son of God who speaks to my heart and not human tradition.

Traditions can serve to connect us to generations that preceded us, or they can move us toward ever more serious error. In the Word of God we see either situation on several occasions. Jesus excoriated the Pharisees whenever He exposed their hypocrisy. He charged, “for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God” [MATTHEW 15:6]. The reason for His condemnation was that they had let go “the commandment of God,” choosing rather to “hold to the tradition of men” [see MARK 7:8].

In contrast, Paul commended Christians who held to traditions they had received from him. For instance, the Corinthians were commended for maintaining “the traditions” Paul had delivered [see 1 CORINTHIANS 11:2]. The Christians in Thessalonica were encouraged to “stand firm and hold to the traditions” that they had been “taught” by the missionaries [2 THESSALONIANS 2:15]. Later, Paul cautioned these same beleaguered Christians to avoid professed believers who walked in idleness, which was contrary to the “traditions” the Thessalonians had received from the missionaries [2 THESSALONIANS 3:6].

What is evident from this cursory review of the Word is that traditions were to arise from and to reflect apostolic teaching. Clearly, this means that godliness, righteousness and industriousness are expected of Christians. Order in the family and order in the church are “traditions” delivered to the churches. Religious traditions having no basis in Scripture, however, should be questioned and decisively rejected, especially when such traditions contradict the teaching and the intent of the Word. Our best thoughts are not worthy of consideration to supplant the revealed will of God.

Certainly, this should hold true when we consider the ordinances. If we are told in Scripture to initiate our infants into the fellowship of the church, then we should be able to demonstrate that teaching from the Word of God. If, on the other hand, we have embraced a human tradition that adumbrates and obscures the doctrine of grace, know that such an action is unworthy of God’s people. If the Word of God teaches the need to sprinkle water on people wishing to identify with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection, then we should sprinkle water on people. However, if we are to picture the Gospel of Christ, then we should be careful to fulfil the intent of the written Word. Likewise, if we are taught in the Word of God to perform a rite to transform people into Christians, then we should perform that rite. However, if there is no warrant for such an act in the Word of God, we should be courageous enough to reject the act as errant.

Traditions can be good, especially when they reflect the truth of the Word of God and therefore lead us to honour God through obedience to His revealed will. However, traditions that have arisen through the specious sophistries of man have no place in the life of the child of God. We are called to observe the ordinances delivered—baptism and the Lord’s Table—because Christ *commanded* them of those who follow Him. We do not observe these ordinances in order to create Christians, as though we are able to coerce the Spirit of God to do what He alone can do.

I fear that far too many churches hold to practises that would not be recognisable to the gifted men who gave us the Scriptures. I do not propose to recite a list of practises that may have questionable value; rather, I am focused on the baptism of those who confess Christ as Lord. Assuredly, the Apostle spoke of that ordinance, albeit in passing, assuming that his readers would immediately recognise his reference as finding fulfilment in their own actions.

BAPTISM PORTRAYS A BURIAL — “buried with him in baptism...” The Apostle contrasts past practises once required of all wishing to enter the ranks of God’s covenant people, and that practise which has now superseded those practises. In drawing this contrast, he speaks of the baptism of those who were reading this letter. There is a natural ease inherent in his words that lead us to expect that had we been among those first readers, we would have no question about his meaning. Speaking of being “buried with [Christ] in baptism,” he speaks of the act of being immersed in water. It would not be improper to translate Paul’s thought into English in the following form, “In your baptising,” that is, when you were baptised, “you were buried with Him.” Baptism anticipates a burial.

I am only acknowledging what should be obvious—baptism pictures the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Baptism serves as a powerful confession that the one baptised accepts that Good News as true and accurate, and that the one baptised so intimately identifies with the Saviour that he is saying that he was intimately involved in the death of the Saviour and that he was actually laid in the grave with the Lord Jesus. The one baptised is confessing that it was her or his sin that caused the death of the Saviour, and that just as Christ was laid in the tomb, so the one baptised is confessing that the old life has been forsaken—counted as dead with Christ and now put away forever.

I am not alone in this understanding; gifted men who might otherwise dissent from the insistence that baptism is by immersion also recognised the clear implication of the apostolic practise. Handley C. G. Moule, the evangelical Anglican Bishop of Durham, writes in his excellent commentary, “The immersion of the baptised (the primeval and ideal form of rite...) is undoubtedly here in view. The plunge beneath the water signified identification with the buried Lord, and sealed it to faith.”²

Doctor F. B. Westcott is recognised as being among the finest scholars of biblical Greek. In his commentary on Colossians, Westcott writes, “The ‘burial’ under the water is the pledge of effective ‘death’; the ‘rising again’ is the symbol of the new ‘*pneumatic*’ life.”³ This Anglican scholar was compelled through knowledge of the language to confess that baptism spoke of burial and resurrection through immersion into water and through being raised out of the water.

² H. C. G. Moule, **Studies in Colossians & Philemon** (Kregel, Grand Rapids, MI 1977) 105

³ Frederick Brooke Westcott, **Colossians: A Letter to Asia** (MacMillan and Co., Limited, London, UK 1914) 107

Lightfoot, another Anglican scholar of the first rank writes in a treatise on the Colossian letter, “Baptism is the grave of the old man, and the birth of the new. As he sinks beneath the baptismal waters, the believer buries there all his corrupt affections and past sins; as he emerges thence, he rises regenerate, quickened to new hopes and a new life... Thus baptism is an image of his participation both in the death and in the resurrection of Christ.”⁴

Similar arguments can be marshalled from commentaries provided by contemporary scholars such as Peter O’Brien⁵ and James Dunn,⁶ neither of whom is likely to profess Baptist sympathies concerning the ordinance of baptism. What is apparent to one who is reading Paul’s words is that baptism pictures a divine transaction that has occurred in the life of the believer. The baptised individual is openly identifying with Christ in His Passion, and that one has forever left the past in the past.

William Barclay is considered one of the premier Greek scholars today. In his set entitled “The Daily Study Bible,” Barclay writes concerning this Pauline observation, “When we think of [Paul’s] view of baptism we must remember three things. In the early Church, as today in the mission field and even in the Church extension areas, men were coming straight out of heathenism into Christianity. They were knowingly and deliberately leaving one way of life for another; and making in the act of baptism a conscious decision. This was of course, before the days of infant baptism...”

“Baptism in the time of Paul was three things. It was *adult* baptism; it was *instructed* baptism; and ... it was baptism by *total immersion*. Therefore the symbolism of baptism was manifest. As the waters closed over the man’s head, it was as if he died; as he rose up again from the water, it was as if he rose to new life. Part of him was dead and gone for ever; he was a new man risen to a new life.

“But, it must be noted, that symbolism could become a reality ... only when a man believed intensely in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It could only happen when a man believed in the effective working of God which had raised Jesus Christ from the dead and could do the same for him. Baptism for the Christian was in truth a dying and a rising again, because he believed that Christ had died and risen again and that he was sharing the experience of his Lord.”⁷

In baptism as practised during the days of the Apostles, an individual openly identified with Christ in His death. Through baptism, the individual acknowledged his belief that Jesus died and was buried. Jesus had spoken of His death as a shared baptism [see **MARK 10:38, 39**]. It should be no surprise, therefore, that His disciples would speak of their own baptism as sharing in His death. Burial is understood as the conclusion of the event of dying; and so, burial in the baptismal waters speaks of the conclusion of the dying event for the child of God. In baptism, the Christian is identifying completely with Christ in His death, and they are confessing their own death to sin. The burial is proof that a real death has occurred, and the old life is now a thing of the past.

⁴ J. B. Lightfoot, **Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon** (MacMillian and Co., Limited, London, UK 1879) 184

⁵ Peter T. O’Brien, **Word Biblical Commentary: Colossians, Philemon, Vol. 44** (Word, Waco, TX 1982) 118

⁶ James D. G. Dunn, **New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1996) 159

⁷ William Barclay, **The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians: The Daily study Bible** (Revised ed), (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA 1975) 139-40

There is one other significant element revealed through study of the grammar of the text. Burial is the conclusion of dying, as I have noted, and the one buried in water is making a conclusive statement. The enacted willingness to identify with the complete event of Jesus' death demonstrates the commitment of the one baptised. He makes the identification voluntarily, and not coercively. However, he seeks the assistance of another in baptism. The passive tense indicates that the one baptised yields to the one baptising, indicating his surrender to full identification with the Saviour in His Passion. It is a statement confessing the effectiveness of all that Christ's death has accomplished.

Baptism does mark our entry into the church, but it has more far-reaching implications than simply serving as an initiatory rite. Baptism is more connected with death than with a washing. "Baptism is a performative visual aid in which we symbolically re-enact Christ's death and resurrection. In baptism, we voluntarily accept God's judgement on our sin and the sentence of death." Baptism marks a break with the past. We die to the old—the old ways of living, the old alliances, the old powers that formerly held sway over us.⁸

BAPTISM ANTICIPATES A RESURRECTION — "You were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead." Baptism is much more than a death, for Christ rose from the dead, conquering death for our justification. Not only is baptism the grave for the "old self," it is the birthplace of the "new man." Just as baptism declares death to the old order, so it also proclaims that the new order is inaugurated. This is the meaning of Paul's triumphant exultation: "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" [2 CORINTHIANS 5:17].

The transformation of life for the one baptised is not magical, but it is nevertheless real. The child of God confesses through baptism that a transformation has truly taken place, though they should be made aware that struggles still lie ahead as the new man is expressed. This is why we are called to live holy lives [see 1 PETER 1:15, 16].

In the movie "Tender Mercies," a former country music star whose career has been ruined by alcohol winds up working at a run-down motel for a widow with a young son. The man is changed, and eventually this man and the woman marry. Both the son and his new stepfather are baptized on the same day. As they drive home in their pickup truck, the son reflects on the experience and says to his stepfather, "Everyone said I would feel like a changed person. I guess I do feel a little different but not a whole lot different. Do you?" "Not yet," came the reply. The son continues, "You don't look any different. You think I look any different?" "Not yet," came the reply again.⁹

Some people are blessed to have an instantaneous, even a dramatic transformation, but for most of us, the expression of the transformation is more gradual. We are immediately changed when we believe the message of grace, and we stand before God complete in Christ, but the draw of the old nature is still powerful. Nevertheless, in baptism, we declare that we have been raised to newness of life. Most of us will need to "unlearn" years of sinful habits. What is changed is that we now have the Spirit of Christ with us, we are forgiven our sin and we no longer struggle alone.

⁸ see David E. Garland, **NIV Application Commentary, New Testament: Colossians and Philemon** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids MI © 1998) 167-8

⁹ "Tender Mercies," Bruce Beresford, Director, Horton Foote, screenplay, EMI Films, 1983, http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Tender_Mercies, accessed 22 May 2011

The Word of God teaches, “We walk by faith, not by sight” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:7]. Just so, we receive the resurrection through newness of life by faith and not because we “feel” the transformation into a new life. For this reason, we are responsible to choose righteousness; but we have a new power to be godly that was not previously available to us. Of course, I am speaking of the power of God’s indwelling Spirit.

Why, if this is what is pictured, do we still struggle with sin? Why should the child of God be compelled to fight with the old nature? Shouldn’t living a righteous life be easy? It has been said that though we may drown the old man, he can certainly swim. The Apostle struggled with the old man, just as we do. In his letter to the Romans, Paul spoke of the ongoing struggle and the ultimate victory we can enjoy.

“I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Then, he quickly points to the only victory we can anticipate. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin” [ROMANS 7:21-25].

As the one baptised is raised up out of the water, that individual is confessing that though she is still engaged in spiritual struggle to live out Christ’s presence, she is not surrendered to some inevitable defeat. Instead, she is saying quite clearly that she is now alive to the new reality of grace and life since the old is dead. As I began this portion of the message, I cited 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17 in part. The second half of that passage speaks to this particular reality; “The old has passed away, behold, the new has come.” This is the declaration of being raised up out of the water of baptism.

Baptism marks the defeat of powers that formerly held sway over us. The Word of God declares that we were “dead in trespasses and sins” [EPHESIANS 2:1]. However, God, in Christ “raised us up with Him” [EPHESIANS 2:6]. All this was accomplished when we believed the message of life, and in our baptism, we declare this magnificent truth. Those who have died with Christ and who also were raised with Him no longer live under the old regime where the authorities and powers hold sway. Baptism is the sign to the world that we are owned, secured and empowered by Christ. Christians owe the authorities and powers of this world no allegiance; and, in turn, the authorities and powers have no control over our lives. Christians who openly confess their faith through baptism are declaring that they are forever removed from thralldom to the power of evil.

David Garland addresses this truth when he writes, “Our symbolic death in baptism delivers us from real fears and powers. But this message is not always clearly communicated. A child’s view about baptism in the novel **A Day No Pigs Would Die** may match the opinion that some adults secretly hold. A matronly aunt remonstrates with her young nephew about his bad grammar and says if he were a ‘fearing Baptist,’ he would do better in English. The frightened lad thought to himself:

“That was it! That there was the time my heart almost stopped. I’d heard about Baptists from Jacob Henry’s mother. According to her, Baptists were a strange lot. They put you in water to see how holy you were. Then they ducked you under the water three times. Didn’t matter a whit if you could swim or no. If you didn’t come up, you got dead and your mortal soul went to Hell. But if you did come up, it was even worse. You had to be a Baptist.”

“Baptism represents more than our death; it proclaims our triumph with Christ. We are raised with Christ, who is head over every power and authority [COLOSSIANS 2:10], who has disarmed every power and authority [COLOSSIANS 2:15], and who sits triumphantly at the right hand of God [COLOSSIANS 3:1].”¹⁰

In Christ, we are enabled to live fearlessly now! We know that we are no longer condemned because we have buried the old nature with Him in the tomb, and we are now raised with Him to a new life. We are no longer consigned to defeat and paucity of spirit because we are powerless; instead, in Christ, we enjoy the power of life. This is the truth we declare through our resurrection with Him as pictured through our baptism.

BAPTISM PICTURES SPIRITUAL REALITY — “You, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”

Assuredly, I have been addressing the issue of baptism. However, I have not been urging on you, my listeners, baptism as an act. The mere act of being immersed in water has neither meaning nor validity in the absence of the new life that is offered to all who receive Christ Jesus as Master. Rather, I have been urging you to ensure that you believe the message of life—that Christ died because of your sins and that He has been raised to ensure your justification before the Father. I have been urging each one who listens to ensure that he is alive in the Son of God because he has submitted to His reign over life. I have been urging each listener to believe that her old nature has been buried with Him and that she is now alive in Him. This is the message of the Gospel that sets us free to be all that He calls us to be.

The message of grace begins with the frank appraisal of our spiritual destitution. We are sinners condemned by God. Though we deserve condemnation, instead of banishing us from His presence forever, God has intervened to relieve our distress through sending His Son to offer His own life as a sacrifice because of our sin. Christ Jesus presented Himself as an infinite sacrifice for sin. In this way, He took the penalty for our sin upon Himself. Then, in order to demonstrate the reality of His claim to be the Son of God, and thus to confirm that His sacrifice is sufficient to deliver us from all condemnation, He broke the bonds of death and came out of the tomb. This was no spirit resurrection; instead, he was seen and verified as being alive by those who knew Him—it was a vivid and powerful demonstration that death could not hold Him.

The call of God to all mankind is to believe this truth, to receive the forgiveness of sin through believing this Good News. We cannot make God accept us; but because God is love, He has already provided the way for us to be saved. This is the basis for the declaration sounded in the Apostle’s letter to the Romans Christians. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” [ROMANS 10:9-13].

¹⁰ Garland, op. cit., 167-169

The spiritual reality is that the one who believes is made alive in Christ the Lord. This present reality will be fully revealed at His return. This is promised, for instance, through John's powerful statement to believers, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is" [1 JOHN 3:2]. This is the message by which we live—Christ is alive, and in Him, we are invited to live. Through faith in Him as the victorious Son of God, we are forever freed from condemnation and we are forgiven all sin. It is through the act of baptism that we declare these truths. What is reality is pictured through our identification with Him in baptism.

Any baptism that fails to picture the spiritual reality of our condition as mere mortals, and then fails to declare our glorious triumph through the resurrection of Christ fails as a declaration of all that God has done for us through the Gospel. This is the reason that we Baptists cannot accept as baptism any action that merely wets a small spot on the forehead. Though modern churchmen attempt to make their rites and rituals attractive through giving them names that sound ever so pious, any act that fails to picture the Gospel of Christ cannot meet the biblical criterion for baptism.

Do you imagine that I have I said these things to initiate a fight with other good Christians. Not at all! There can be no conflict if we agree upon the authority to which we appeal for justification of our faith and practise. Conflict can only arise when we promote our opinion as having greater validity than the Word, thereby making ourselves into our own authority. I have appealed to the Word of God for our practise as Baptists. Surely, all who share our appeal to the Word of God will agree with what is revealed therein. We Baptists baptise, not in order to make Christians, but rather we baptise because we receive Christians who are willing to identify themselves as those who belong to Christ. This compels me to ask you, then, "Have you been saved?" Have you believed the message of life, and have you agreed with God that you were dead, but that through faith in the Son of God you have been made alive?

With the Apostle, I urge all who hear the message this day to "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the Faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realise this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you" [2 CORINTHIANS 13:5]? If somehow you realise that you do not have Christ as ruler over your life, our plea to you echoes the Apostle, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" [ACTS 16:31]. We call you to believe Him because "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" [ACTS 4:12]. Together with Ananias of old, we command all who have believed to "rise and be baptised" [ACTS 22:16].

Do this now. Do this today. Believe on Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God; and believing, openly confess Him as commanded through receiving baptism in which you identify with Him in His Passion and in His Victory. Amen.