

## Believer's Baptism and the Early Church

### Introduction

Henry Dunster interrupting the baptism of an infant in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1660s: "As Dunster affirmed at a private conference organized to convince him of the error of his ways, 'All instituted Gospel Worship hath some express word of Scripture. But pedobaptism hath none.' For Dunster, the heart of the matter was that 'only' visible believers were to be baptized, but infants were not visible believers."<sup>1</sup>

*How was it that the baptism of infants came to the almost universal view of the church in the 1660s? Had it always been that way?*

In our teaching time today, I will argue that the baptism of believers by immersion is the most faithful interpretation of the New Testament. First, we will look at the biblical evidence for this position and then we will look at its historical development in Europe and specifically England in the 1600s.

### I. The Doctrine of Believer's Baptism<sup>2</sup>

#### The Mode, Member, and Meaning of Baptism

In his *Systematic Theology* Wayne Grudem writes, "The practice of baptism in the New Testament was carried out in one way: the person being baptized was *immersed* or put completely under the water and then brought back up again. Baptism *by immersion* is therefore the 'mode' of baptism or the way in which baptism was carried out in the New Testament."<sup>3</sup>

Grudem then grants us several compelling reasons to believe that baptism by immersion is the correct interpretation of baptism from the Bible: the definition and etymology of the word baptism, the New Testament narrative passages regarding baptism, and the argument from the meaning of baptism.<sup>4</sup> Today, we will investigate these reasons along with him and build a case for baptism by immersion of believers into Christ's church. After we've done this, we will briefly look at the history of early Baptists—those who held this view of baptism—in England. Through them and their legacy, though it is broad, we are able to trace the modern root of our convictions about baptism amongst other important doctrines.<sup>5</sup>

#### The Mode: Immersion

**The definition and usage of the word baptism.** First, it must be stated that the "Greek word *baptizō* means 'to plunge, dip, immerse' something in water. This is the commonly

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<sup>1</sup>Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A.G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2025), 71.

<sup>2</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 967. This source will be drawn on extensively in this section.

<sup>3</sup>Grudem, 967.

<sup>4</sup>Grudem, 967.

<sup>5</sup>Grudem, 967, 970.

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recognized and standard meaning of the term in ancient Greek literature both inside and outside the Bible.”<sup>6</sup>

**The New Testament narrative passages regarding the mode of baptism.** Second, there are several passages that seem to indicate that John the Baptist—from whose example the practice of baptism was likely taken—fully immersed those he baptized in water.

- **Mark 1:5**—John was baptizing in the Jordan, not beside, by, or near the river.
- **Mark 1:10**—Jesus came up out of the water.
- **John 3:23**—John was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because of the ample supply of water. This would be needed to immerse.
- **Acts 8:38-39**—This passage also indicates that the Ethiopian eunuch was baptized in such a way that he went into the water and came out of it, indicating immersion.

**Evidence from the early church.** Third, writings from early church history such as the *Didache* confirm that immersion was the ordinary mode of baptism in the first few centuries of the church's existence.<sup>7</sup> Consider the *Didache's* comments on baptism:

Now concerning baptism, baptize as follows: after you have reviewed all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in running water. But if you have no running water, then baptize in some other water; and if you are not able to baptize in cold water, then do so in warm. But if you have neither, then pour water on the head three times in the name of Father and son and Holy Spirit. And before the baptism let the one baptizing and the one who is to be baptized fast, as well as any others who are able. Also, you must instruct the one who is to be baptized to fast for one or two days beforehand (7.1-7.4).<sup>8</sup>

What can be discerned from this excerpt is that baptism by immersion is in view. Specifically, of those who are able to receive instruction and fast, namely, those who are not infants. *To this we will turn next.*

### The Member: Believing Christians

**Immersion is the mode, but who is to be baptized?** This too is addressed by the data that we find in the New Testament. Though there are many passages that we could point to, we will look at two from Acts and one from Romans.

**Acts 2:36-41.** This passage is the conclusion to Peter's sermon on Pentecost. He stands before thousands in Jerusalem and boldly proclaims that Jesus is Lord and Savior to those who crucified him. Our purpose lies in an examination of verse 41. There, Luke, the human author of Acts records, "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41 ESV). Grudem notes that "The text

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<sup>6</sup>Such as local church autonomy, the role of biblical elders in the governance of the local church, affirmation of the church members in decision making, and the priesthood of all believers.

<sup>7</sup>For a perspective from Everett Ferguson see the following summary of his work *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* at the following link. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/evangelical-history/baptism-early-church/>

<sup>8</sup>Holmes, Michael W. *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek and English Translations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 355.

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specifies that baptism was administered to those who 'received his word' and therefore trusted in Christ for salvation."<sup>9</sup> There is an unbreakable link between receiving the word of the gospel and baptism. One cannot receive the gospel if one cannot understand it; comprehension is necessary. Therefore, only believers are to be baptized.

**Acts 8:12.** A second example that confirms this finding is found in Acts 8:12. This passage records Philip the apostle's missionary work in the city of Samaria. Here, we read, "when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women" (Acts 8:12). Again, the pattern is established. First, the Samaritans received the word of the gospel—they believed—and then they were baptized. To believe requires comprehension. Therefore, this excludes infants.

**Bonus: Acts 10:44-48.** Baptism is for those who have received the word of the gospel and the Holy Spirit. In other words, those who have been regenerated.

**Galatians 3:27.** Grudem masterfully argues that "Paul here assumes that baptism is the outward sign of inward regeneration [or new birth]. This simply could not have been true of infants—Paul could not have said, 'As many *infants* as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ,' for infants have not yet come to saving faith or given any evidence of regeneration."<sup>10</sup>

All this points to the conclusion that the objects of baptisms are those who are already members of Christ Jesus. That is, those who have received Christ as their savior by faith alone in the gospel. In short, baptism is for believers.

*So far, we have seen that baptism is by immersion and it is for believers. Now, we will consider what it means.*

### The Meaning: Remembrance, Union, Application

**Definition.** Our doctrinal statement gives this definition for the meaning of baptism: 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).<sup>11</sup>

Let's break this definition into pieces and investigate each part of it under these headings: the meaning of baptism is remembrance, union, and application.

**Remembrance—the Gospel is proclaimed.** First, baptism is a "solemn and beautiful testimony of a believer showing forth his faith in the crucified, buried, and risen Savior" (1 Cor 15:3-4). When one goes under the water, they identify with Jesus's death. When they come up out of the water, they identify with his resurrection and newness of life (Col 2:11-12). When we as the church practice the ordinance of baptism, we remind ourselves of the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus for sin. We remember that we were ransomed from the futile

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<sup>9</sup>Grudem, 970.

<sup>10</sup>Grudem, 971.

<sup>11</sup>Grace Church of Santa Rosa, *Statement of Faith*. Accessible here: <https://www.gracechurchsr.com/statement-of-faith>

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ways we inherited from our forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot (1 Pet 1:18-19).

**Union—the benefits of the Gospel are claimed.** Second, baptism pictures our “union with [Christ] in death to sin and resurrection to a new life” (Rom 6:1-11). In this passage from Romans 6, Paul answers the rhetorical question of “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” by arguing from our union with Christ. He states that since we have died and risen with Christ Jesus, which is pictured by baptism, that, therefore, we should walk in newness of life. We should not return to our former master of sin since we have died and been set free in Christ Jesus. Paul summarizes in verse 11: “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

The point is that not only does baptism remind us of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ Jesus, it also pictures our union with Christ—our death and resurrection with him. “The goal is not a mere spiritual decision but a whole-life transformation that is evidenced in part through baptism.”<sup>12</sup>

**Application—the Gospel joins me to the church.** Third, baptism “is also a sign of fellowship and identification with the visible body of Christ” (Acts 2:41-42). Baptism applies certain benefits to us. As we see in Acts, baptism marks, under normal circumstances, one’s entrance into the universal, or catholic, church. In the New Testament, the pattern for baptism is as follows: someone hears the gospel proclaimed, believes it, and is almost immediately baptized. There does not seem to be a significant delay between the profession of faith and immersion in water. (Now, there are some occasions where people are not able to be baptized right away and, nonetheless, they are still wholly saved since salvation is by faith in Christ alone.) Baptism, therefore, applies the benefit of entrance into Christ’s church to the believer through their public profession of faith.

Second, Grudem insightfully notes how baptism confers a spiritual benefit upon the one baptized and the church at large. He writes,

when baptism is properly carried out then of course it brings some spiritual benefit to believers as well. There is the blessing of God’s favor that comes with all obedience, as well as the joy that comes through public profession of one’s faith, and the reassurance of having a clear physical picture of dying and rising with Christ and of washing away sins. Certainly the Lord gave baptism to strengthen and encourage our faith—and it should do so for everyone who is baptized and for every believer who witnesses a baptism.<sup>13</sup>

Third, baptism gives us confidence that “as certainly as the body is buried under water, and risen again, so certainly shall the bodies of the saints be raised by the power of Christ, in the day of the resurrection, to reign with Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

In summary, baptism applies us to the church now, gives us spiritual benefit and confidence in what Christ has done in the past, and it gives us hope for the future that we will be raised with Christ.

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<sup>12</sup>Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A.G. Haykin, 26.

<sup>13</sup>Grudem, 981.

<sup>14</sup>*First London Confession* (1646). Cited in Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 26.

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*These, though briefly considered, are the mode, member, and meaning of baptism. But has this always been the universal view in Christ's church through the ages? Let's briefly consider the historical background to baptism.*

### II. A Very Brief Historical Background to Baptism

#### New Testament

From our brief survey of the New Testament evidence above, the New Testament itself seems to indicate that the baptism by immersion was the settled norm. Although there are no direct passages that give instructions for how to baptize, we may recall how John the Baptist was baptizing by immersion in the Jordan river. This mode of complete immersion was also repeated by Philip when he baptized the Ethiopian eunuch. From these observations it is clear that baptism in the New Testament era was by immersion.

Further, those who were baptized were those who had received the word of the gospel. To receive the gospel, one must first understand it. This eliminates the possibility that those baptized were infants. Therefore, the data from the New Testament seems to indicate that baptism was for believers by immersion.

#### Didache (Late first or early second-century)<sup>15</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the Didache indicates that baptism by immersion which was preceded by instruction and teaching was the normal practice for the church in the first few centuries of its existence.

#### Patristics

**Justin Martyr (c. 103-164 AD).** To quote McKinion at length:

Justin, like the *Didache*, states that those who are to be baptized are those who are "persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to live accordingly." Clearly, believers are in mind here. They already believe the truthfulness of Christianity... Infants cannot be included in Justin's description of those coming to baptism on either of these counts. Infants do not possess the rational capacity to believe the truths of the faith nor can they have committed to live according to them.<sup>16</sup>

**Tertullian (c. 160-220 AD).** Tertullian of Carthage, the guy who coined the Latin word *trinitas*, also wrote a work entitled *On Baptism*. While he had a lot to say, we can be assured that his view at the time of his writing was that baptism of believers by immersion should be and has been the normative view of the church.<sup>17</sup>

**Cyprian (200-258 AD) and Origen (c. 185-254 AD).** Beginning in the middle of the third century, however, there began to be more disagreement about who should be baptized and how. Increasingly, the bishops in Africa argued that infants should be baptized because, as

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<sup>15</sup>Steven A. McKinion, "Believers' Baptism In The Patristic Writings," *Southeastern Theological Review* 14, no. 2 (2023): 79.

<sup>16</sup>McKinion, 81. Citing Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61.

<sup>17</sup>McKinion, 84. Citing Tertullian, *On Baptism* 2, in *ANF* vol. 3.

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Cyprian's letter seems to indicate, baptism corresponded to circumcision in the Old Testament. Since children were not excluded from the covenant sign in the Old Covenant, they reasoned, then they should not be excluded under the New Covenant either. "Moreover, baptism is even more important for infants, Cyprian argues, because they enjoy the help, mercy, and grace of God from the very beginning of their lives, helping them to overcome sin."<sup>18</sup>

Origen too advocated for the baptism of infants. He believed that since infants participated in the sinful stain (original sin) of Adam, that baptism would be a benefit to them, though he also believed that infants did not yet need the forgiveness of sins.<sup>19</sup> One can see how a theological argument has begun to emerge for infant baptism that is not necessarily rooted in the pages of the Scripture.

It was in the third century that arguments like those cited above began to emerge for the baptism of infants. Cyprian and Origen advocated that infant baptism that it should be the normal operation of the church, not just for special cases. These views paved the way forward for infant baptism to be standard practice for a majority of church history.<sup>20</sup>

### Why did this change happen?

McKinion writes the following as a potential answer, "The evidence from the third century points to the origin of infant baptism in the practice of baptizing mortally ill infants due to an increasing belief that baptism was necessary for the salvation of the child."<sup>21</sup>

The question of whether or not infants and children are sinful and therefore under the judgement of God also played a significant role in the mass adoption of infant baptism. Augustine of Hippo argued that baptism has power in-and-of-itself to grant the remission of sins. He argued in part that infants should be baptized because "infants, as well as adults, are in *need* of the forgiveness of sin."<sup>22</sup> If you believed that your child would remain unsaved unless they were baptized you would absolutely want them to be baptized as soon as possible—especially if they were terribly sick!

Although there is some opposition to infant baptism moving forward into the fourth and fifth centuries—especially from such notable figures as Gregory Nazianzus and Cyril of Jerusalem—it nonetheless became the standard practice of the church moving forward.<sup>23</sup> Because of the sad reality of infant mortality and questions about the sinfulness of infants and children, infant baptism became the normative practice of the church. All despite that fact that "Prior to the third century there is no voice found in the patristic writings that rejects the baptism of only believers [believer's baptism]."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>McKinion, 88. Citing Cyprian, *Epistle 58.6*.

<sup>19</sup>McKinion, 88-89. Citing Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus 7*, in *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 83, trans. G. W. Barkley (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992).

<sup>20</sup>McKinion, 89.

<sup>21</sup>Steven A. McKinion, "Believers' Baptism In The Patristic Writings," *Southeastern Theological Review* 14, no. 2 (2023): 89.

<sup>22</sup>McKinion, 93.

<sup>23</sup>McKinion, 91-92. Gregory allowed the baptism of children but only in emergency situations and then only to those who could understand the "basic outlines" of the faith.

<sup>24</sup>McKinion, 94.

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### Infant Baptism as the Norm Until the Reformation

These church fathers, especially Augustine, were incredibly influential in the formation of the medieval church. In fact, Augustine has been called the “Architect of the Middle Ages”.<sup>25</sup> As such, Augustine’s view of baptism was incredibly popular and shaped the practice of the church well into the Middle Ages until the Reformation. Even during the Reformation, we will see that the belief in believer’s baptism can be outright deadly.

*But that story will have to wait until next week...*

### Conclusion

I’d like to end by returning to our definition of baptism from our *Statement of Faith*:

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).<sup>26</sup>

**Remember your baptism.** Remember that Christ Jesus was sent to the world by the Father to atone for your sin guilt.

**Remember your baptism.** It is a demonstration of God’s abundant mercy and grace in your life and a testimony of his great love for you.

**Remember your baptism.** Remember that as Christ Jesus died and went down into the tomb, so you went down into the waters of baptism and died. You died to sin your former master. You died to your old self and your evil ways. You died to sin, death, and Satan.

**Remember your baptism.** Remember that as Christ Jesus rose from the grave, so you have been raised out of the waters of baptism to a new life. You have peace with God. You have received forgiveness. You have been sealed with the Holy Spirit. You are held in the arms of the Father and he will never let you go. Remember that when he sees you, he sees the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. Remember that Christ swallowed up death for us and gave us his imperishable life.

**Remember your baptism.** Remember that even on your worst days—when you fail in the worst way, returning to your sin like a dog returns to its vomit—that your baptism testifies to God’s unfailing love and forgiveness. Remember that you’re not saved because you’re good, you’re not saved because the strength of your faith; no, you’re saved because Christ Jesus died and rose again. We receive forgiveness, life, and every good thing by trusting in him alone. Our whole merit is to place our whole hope in him who makes the whole man safe—Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup> We don’t trust ourselves; we trust Christ.

**Remember your baptism.** Remember that as surely as Christ rose from the grave, so you will physically be raised from the dead to rule with him in the New Creation. He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion (Phil 1:6).

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<sup>25</sup>Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, “Augustine of Hippo” in *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 20.

<sup>26</sup>Grace Church of Santa Rosa, *Statement of Faith*.

<sup>27</sup>Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermon 61*, in *Canticles*.