

Baptism

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Baptism is a subject that has unfortunately caused tremendous divisions within the Christian church over the last two thousand years and remains as a stumbling block in the quest for Christian unity today. Finding a resolution to this problem is certainly not easy. Differences in baptism include differences over: the meaning of baptism; the qualifications and age of those to be baptized; who can administer baptism; mode of baptism (immersion, pouring or sprinkling); formulas in the baptismal procedure; and, pre-baptismal instruction. In fact, rather than being a unifying factor, as it probably was in earliest Christianity, agreement on baptism has been one of the greatest obstacles to Christian unity over the centuries. As Donald M. Lake states in his article "Baptism" in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (p.100),

In the sixteenth century, baptism along with the Eucharist became one of the major divisive issues not only separating reforming groups from Catholicism but also dividing the rival sects.

Because of the historical divisions in Christianity over the subject of baptism, the topic is best approached today as an issue of *interpretation* - not, of *obedience*. To present water baptism today as an issue of obedience - thus calling into question the commitment of those who disagree with oneself on this subject - misses the obvious point that disagreements over baptism today are plainly matters of misunderstandings and differences in interpretation that have arisen over time. Surely it is evident: if all sincere believers in Christ agreed on the correct interpretation of baptism there would be no disagreement at all - we would all simply "be obedient" to that correct *interpretation*.

As with all biblical topics, if we are to overcome the divisions today due to our different understandings and practices of baptism our thinking and actions must be governed by the "mind of Christ". That is to say, we must proceed in our quest for the correct understanding and practice of baptism

"in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (Rom. 7:6).

All Baptized in One Spirit into One Body

In the New Testament two distinct types of baptism are spoken of and, normally, experienced: (1) water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; 8:12, 16, 36-38; 10:47-48; 19:5; etc.); and, (2) baptism in holy Spirit (Mark 1:8; Acts 1:5; I Cor. 12:13; etc.). New Testament believers clearly distinguished, and contrasted, the efficacy of being "baptized in the Spirit" and being "baptized in water". This was true of John the Baptist (Luke 3:16, etc.); Jesus (Acts 1:5); Peter (Acts 11:15-17); and, Paul (I Cor. 12:13). Although water baptism continued throughout the New Testament as a meaningful way of expressing the faith of new *converts* into the household of faith, it is clear that the baptism in holy Spirit was *God's* means of showing *His* acceptance of believers into his family. The following verses, among many others, make this clear:

I [John the Baptist] baptize you with water, but he [the Messiah] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8).

On one occasion, while he [Jesus] was eating with them, he gave them this command: Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5).

As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them [Cornelius and his household - Acts 10] as he had come on us at the beginning [i.e. Pentecost]. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God? (Acts 11:15-17).

Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the

gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith (Acts 15:7-9).

For the new covenant church the Spirit of God in the life of each believer was the single most important unifying principle of their existence. It was God's "seal" of acceptance into his new covenant people (Eph. 1:13-14, II Cor. 3; etc.) and gave each individual believer direct "access" to God as their own personal Father (Eph. 2:18 -22). In I Corinthians 12 Paul clearly states his understanding of how Christians come to receive these blessings and become "one in Christ Jesus":

For we were all baptized by [in] one Spirit into one body - whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink (I Cor. 12:13).

According to this verse *all* believers in Christ are "baptized in one Spirit into one body." This does not mean, as the context clearly shows, that only those who speak in tongues are "baptized in the Spirit". That is an unfortunate misrepresentation of this text that has been promoted widely by the wider "charismatic movement". The effect has been to cause an immediate and deep division amongst those who speak in tongues and those who don't - as though those who speak in tongues are the *only* ones who have been "baptized in the Spirit".

Now though it is true that speaking in tongues is *one* of the "manifestations" of the Spirit, the context is crystal clear in I Cor. chapters 12-14 that *all* believers in Christ are baptized in the one Spirit into Christ's body, and, that *not* all of these believers spoken of in I Cor. 12-14 spoke in tongues. This doesn't mean that a believer should not desire tongues, or any of the other spiritual gifts or manifestations (I Cor. 14:2), but it certainly does mean that no particular manifestation of the Spirit - aside from the Spirit inspired confession "Jesus is Lord" (I Cor. 12:3) - should be seen as *the* proof that a person is "Spirit baptized". In the new covenant era *all* Christians are "Spirit baptized" - since a Christian, by definition, is one who has the Spirit (cf. Rom. 8:1-9; Eph. 1:13-14; I Cor. 12:3; etc.).

It must be emphasized that there is no biblical evidence whatsoever for saying that I Cor. 12:13 has anything at all to do with water baptism. In the NT the Spirit is received through faith in Christ - not through water baptism (Gal. 3:1-5; 3:14; Acts 15:6-11). In fact, as James Dunn states,

There is nothing to suggest that an equation between baptism and new birth existed for any NT writer ("Baptism", *New Bible Dictionary*, p. 123).

God is the "heart searcher" and it is he who does the "baptizing" with the Spirit through his exalted Messiah, Jesus. This being "baptized in the one Spirit" is a direct result of faith in Christ (Acts 15:6-11). It has no direct relationship to water baptism. In the NT the gift of the Spirit was received at times before the baptism of converts (Acts 10), sometimes after the baptism of converts (Acts 8; 19) and sometimes totally apart from any water baptism at all (Acts 2:1-4, etc.).

New Testament Water Baptism: the Baptism of Converts

As with any biblical subject, we must in our study of water baptism: (1) determine the original biblical meaning and practice of baptism as closely as possible; (2) determine how that meaning and practice should be applied today - i.e. given the differences in the historical situation that exists between "then" and "now". In addition, we must also beware of imposing on the first century believers an anachronistic understanding of their terminology or an arbitrary system of interpretation that breaks, alters, or even nullifies, *the original intent* of the first century biblical writers.

What is most important to understand is that in the first century church water baptism was understood to be for "converts" to the Christian faith - those who through repentance and faith accepted Jesus as their Lord and Messiah. In short, in the first century church there was originally a common understanding of the meaning and practice of water baptism - at least in the early years. Baptism with water "in the name of Jesus Christ" was seen as a simple "expression of faith" in Christ - but not, as "faith" itself. It was a way of initiating, and showing acceptance of, new "converts" into the household faith.

Today, however, when one reads the word "baptism" in the New Testament it is extremely difficult to not anachronistically read back into that word the same beliefs and practices with which one is accustomed today. If one grew up in a predominantly Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Lutheran environment one usually thinks in terms of "infant baptism". However, if one grew up in the "Bible Belt" of the United States one normally thinks of "believer's baptism" - the baptism of young adults once they reach an age of accountability and then wish to make a public confession of belief in Christ. Of course, all denominations also baptize new converts to their faith.

However, in the New Testament the baptism of converts is the *only* type of water baptism that is ever recorded or spoken of. The baptism of converts was probably based upon its Judaic usage in Jewish proselyte baptism as well as in the light of John the Baptist's and Jesus' practice. In all of these cases baptism was for those who were making a public expression of their repentance and conversion to a new way of faith and life. And, importantly, in Jewish proselyte baptism children who were later born to these converts were not themselves baptized. Instead, they were considered to be born into Judaism. This same understanding, as seen in I Cor. 7:14, was carried over into the Christian faith (i.e. the true Israel of God). G.B. Caird, the late Professor of New Testament at Oxford University, points this out in his book *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (p. 80-81):

Up to this point we have only been looking at semantic changes which took place during the thousand years in which the books of the Bible were being written. But for the student of the Bible it is equally necessary to be alert to the changes which the biblical words have undergone in the ensuing centuries of Christian history. In what follows I shall not be attempting either to solve or to dissolve with a wave of the linguist's wand all the outstanding differences of Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox theology and churchmanship, but simply to illustrate the linguistic hazards of which Christians of differing traditions must be aware before they ever can converse with one another at all. It is precisely when theologians have claimed biblical authority for their own beliefs and practices that they have been peculiarly exposed to the universal temptation ... of jumping to the conclusion that the biblical writer is referring to what they would be referring to were

they speaking the same words themselves ...

Consider, for example, the long and still continuing debate about baptism, whether it is right to baptize infants or only consenting adults. Both sides have claimed scriptural authority, and both have fallen into the trap of assuming that biblical writers are referring to what we refer to when we speak of baptism, i.e. a rite administered to all who themselves seek, or whose parents seek for them, membership of the church. **But in New Testament times baptism was administered only to converts, who were baptized with their whole household. Children born to parents already Christian were not baptized either in infancy or later in adulthood, because they had been born into the household of faith** [editor's emphasis].

This understanding which is recognized by many NT scholars was also expressed many years ago by the 16th century Unitarian Faustus Socinus.

[Socinus] held that an external baptism with water was not enjoined or even always practiced by the apostles. Socinus saw in it therefore solely a rite, analogous to Jewish proselyte baptism, and argued that, though probably useful for marking the entry of ancient pagans into the New Israel, it had no present utility amongst those born in a Christian environment, except as it might formalize the occasional conversion of a Jew or Turk to Christianity. Born Christians, wrote Socinus, regardless of the communion out of which they may come into the ... Church, need not be baptized, and surely should not be rebaptized (Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, p. 757-8).

It is absolutely important to remember, as James Dunn states, "that any and every statement of the gospel in the NT is historically conditioned and context specific" (Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the NT*, p. xxi). It is clear that the New Testament concept of water baptism was for "converts" only and had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the post-biblical idea that infants or children of believers were to be baptized with water, thus, becoming members of the church.

Biblically, an infant born into a Christian home was considered "holy" at birth and a part of the household of faith (I Cor. 7:14). If brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord - as every Christian child should be - there should be no special moment when that child needs to "repent and be baptized" so as to accept Jesus as "Lord and Christ"

(Acts 2). In short, the child should not need to "convert" to the Christian faith. Nor does a child, or any other believer, need to be baptized or re-baptized any time it sins or any time it learns a new truth in its Christian growth. If the child is raised as a believer it need only, as with any other believer, "continue in the faith and be not moved away from the hope held out in the gospel" (Col. 1:23). The focus should be on the spiritual growth and development of the child, not on a moment when it is formally accepted "by baptism" into the church.

It is, in fact, the post-biblical corruption of "conversion baptism" into "infant baptism" that can probably account for much of the lack of spiritual vitality in the Christian church for much of its history. The idea that when an infant (or anyone else for that matter) is baptized with water that it automatically receives the Spirit, and is, therefore, forever a member of the church - irregardless of its own decision to believe and continue in the faith - is certainly a great perversion of NT baptism. Gordon Fee comments on this in his book *Gospel and Spirit* (p. 118-119):

First, it needs to be noted that the New Testament documents are for the most part all written to first generation adult converts and therefore simply do not describe or address the needs of the second and third generations. What we have described above as the normal Christian experience was normal for *converts*, those about whom Acts is written and to whom Paul's letters were written. But for a second or third generation, who grow up in Christian homes, conversion is seldom so life-changing - nor would I argue, can it or necessarily should it be. But what happens is that the dynamic, experiential quality of the Christian life, as life in the Spirit, also seems to be the first element to go. Thus, there arose a generation that "never knew about the empowering of the Holy Spirit."

Second, and by far more devastating, was the eventual tie of the gift of the Spirit to water baptism, a tie that one is hard-pressed to find in any of the biblical data. And then, when baptism is eventually transferred from adult converts to infants in Christian homes, which meant that they, too, had received the Spirit, the phenomenological, experiential dimension to life in the Spirit was all but eliminated.

Believers today may certainly decide to baptize their children - and it may certainly be meaningful and significant - but it should not be thought that by

doing so that they are "baptizing" in the same manner as the first century church. Nor should it be thought they are fulfilling the commands of verses such as Matt. 28:19 or Acts 2:38, both of which are talking about the baptizing of converts who accept Jesus as Lord and Christ. At best, one could argue that they are "applying" the principle of baptism to new situations - either at infancy when the child is born "holy" to a Christian parent(s); but more likely and with more biblical backing, as a young adult when the young believer decides to make a public confession of faith. If this is meaningful to people and if it adds some sense of godliness and significance to the life of an individual or local church or fellowship then may God bless those who do it. But let them not "despise" or "judge" those who do otherwise - or, vice versa!

Misunderstandings About Baptism

Some beliefs about baptism today can actually be harmful to the proper understanding of the gospel. Two such beliefs are: (1) that baptism itself actually *conveys* "forgiveness of sins"; (2) that the "obedience of faith" *to being baptized* brings about "forgiveness of sins". Both of these ideas are based on verses such as Acts 2:38; Matt. 28:19; I Peter 3:21-22; or Gal. 3:26-27. However, here we must be careful to remember the first century context. First, these verses are speaking about *converts* to Jesus as the Messiah - not about Christian children. Second, they are *not intended* to convey a sense that baptism itself is equivalent to faith. This is an idea that the whole Bible would witness against.

Instead, since the water baptism of *converts* in the early church normally took place at relatively the same time as their initial faith in Christ, baptism could, at times, be spoken of figuratively as the moment of conversion itself. This would be similar to a marriage today where the marriage commitment is normally expressed by a wedding ceremony and the exchanging of rings - as the outward symbol of commitment of a man and woman to each other. But would anyone doubt that a marriage could take place without such a formal ceremony or exchange of rings? In conversion as in marriage it is the commitment of faith that brings about the reality of the new relationship, not the outward symbol.

In his commentary on Galatians Ronald Y. K. Fung speaks directly to certain NT verses that, on

the surface, seem to almost equate baptism with faith:

An extreme mechanistic view of baptism would have us believe that [baptism] was, "for Paul and his readers, universally and unquestionably accepted as a 'mystery' or sacrament which works *ex opere operato*," that the moment the believer receives baptism, union with Christ "takes place in him without cooperation, or exercise of will or thought, on his part." Such a view simply ignores the close connection between faith and baptism in the present instance (Gal. 3:26-27); the fact that in this chapter faith is mentioned 15 times and baptism only once would even by itself compel agreement with the dictum that Paul "by no means unconditionally attributes magic influence to baptism, as if receiving it guaranteed salvation."

According to another view, "that which baptism symbolizes also actually *happens*, and precisely through baptism": "baptism is the moment of faith in which the adoption is realized - in the dual sense of effected by God and grasped by man - which is the same as saying that in baptism faith receives the Christ in whom the adoption is effected." Here the emphasis upon a close alliance of faith and baptism is no doubt well placed; but in seeking to do justice to both ideas this view seems to make faith's efficacy dependent upon baptism as though it were only in baptism (as "*the* moment of faith") that faith receives Christ; this would logically lead to the conclusion that baptism is indispensable for the reception of Christ in whom alone salvation is to be found. **Such a position would, however, be clearly opposed to Paul's teaching on the all-sufficiency of faith for salvation in Galatians itself**, as would become immediately obvious if we substituted baptism for circumcision and regarded it as a condition for salvation.

From the standpoint of the practice of baptism in apostolic times, when faith and baptism were not necessarily two distinct experiences separated by a period of time but two inseparable, almost coincident parts of the one single experience of transition from the old existence to the new, the view under discussion could well be a reflection of the actual state of affairs; but as an analysis of the *logical* relationship between faith and baptism it leaves something to be desired ... the apparent equation of faith and baptism in vv. 26f. may be explained as a natural transference of terms whereby the symbol (baptism) is said to effect that which it symbolizes or as a form of metonymy whereby what is strictly true

of faith is predicated of baptism [Fung, *The New International Commentary to The New Testament, The Epistle to the Galatians*, p. 173-174].

In the New Testament itself we actually have a situation that occurred for Paul in Corinth where an incorrect understanding of baptism was part of the basis for divisions in that church. Though he normally baptized converts in his ministry, Paul boldly stated in I Cor. 1:17:

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel.

This statement does not mean that Paul did not normally baptize converts - he did, as is clear from the Book of Acts. Nevertheless, it certainly shows that Paul understood that there were "higher principles" and that only the gospel itself was "the power of God unto salvation - for everyone who *believes*" (cf. Rom. 1:16). J.D.G. Dunn comments on the controversy that took place in I Cor. 1:10-17 in his book *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, (p. 119-120):

Just as the abuse of circumcision led [Paul] to dispense with circumcision altogether and to exalt faith, in a similar way, when baptism was abused and its role misunderstood, he turned away from it and put its function in proper perspective by highlighting that which really mattered in the ministering and receiving of salvation. The gospel brought salvation to Corinth, but baptism brought division. Therefore Paul thanks God that he did not baptize, and directs attention away from that which had divided them towards that which had brought them all to the one Christ, pointing out that so far as his mission was concerned baptism had no indispensable role and only the gospel mattered.

Donald Lake also concurs about Paul's view of baptism:

That Paul did not conceive of baptism as an essential saving sacrament is clearly indicated by I Corinthians 1:10-18. For Paul there seems to be one essential baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit by which we are incorporated into the body of Christ (cf. 12:12-13; Eph. 4:4). The rest of the NT corpus does not present a unified picture regarding the meaning and administration of baptism ("Baptism", p. 99).

Such words should speak loud and clear to a generation such as ours where there is such confusion and division over baptism - all of which

was "inherited" by those of us born into the 20th century from the "forefathers" our Christian past. And, whether or not one agrees with Dunn's interpretation of this specific passage in I Cor. 1:10-17, the sentiments expressed are still true, not only with regard to baptism, but in many areas of Christian practice. A correct understanding of the OT prophets (Micah 6:6-8), Jesus (Mk. 12:28-34, or Paul (Rom. 2:25-29) could hardly deny this.

Unclear Verses on Baptism

There are also other NT verses about baptism that are widely debated by NT scholars as to their original meaning (e.g. I Pet. 3:21-22 and Heb. 6:2 which is especially notorious in this regard). In truth, no one knows for certain what some of these verses are talking about. There are also some NT verses that could be talking about either water baptism or about being baptized in the Spirit. Gal. 3:26-28 and Rom. 6:3-4 are in this group. Compare the language with I Cor. 12:13:

For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body - whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink (I Cor. 12:13).

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26-28).

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Rom. 6:3-4).

These verses may be alluding to water baptism as a symbol of what the Spirit actually accomplishes -since the water baptism of converts was normally close in time with their reception of the Spirit in the first century church. However, given the close correspondence in language with I Cor. 12:13 where the element by which a believer in Christ is said to be "baptized into Christ" is specifically said to be

"Spirit", it is just as possible, if not more likely, that Paul is speaking of the same reality here.

We certainly have no right to read the word "water" back into the word "baptism" in these verses when neither the text itself nor the context indicate that it should necessarily be there. And, more importantly, we have no right to read our post-biblical doctrines of the baptism of Christian infants or children back into these texts (or into any other text, such as Matt. 28:19 or Acts 2:38) as though a Christian child becomes a member of the body of Christ at the moment of water baptism. These verses are talking about converts to the faith. They have nothing whatsoever to do with the baptism of Christian children.

The Unity of the Spirit

The study and discussion of any biblical subject must always take place in the light of the "higher principles" of God's word that are set-out consistently in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Certainly, the God who "looks on the heart" and who "desires mercy, not sacrifice" is not a God who accepts or rejects an individual on the basis of a correct understanding of a religious practice such as fasting, baptism, circumcision, etc. (cf. Isaiah 58; Mk. 12:33; Rom. 2:25-27). Instead, throughout the Bible God always accepts an individual on the basis of "faith" - a simple trust in the words of God from a heart of child-like humility. It is this simple child-like faith that not only "pleases God" (Heb. 11:6) but also governs the attitudes and lifestyle of any true believer in Christ (Gal. 5:5; II Cor. 1:24; 5:7).

The example of Abraham as set forth in Rom. 4 also makes it crystal clear that "the faith that justifies" is "wholly independent of an external rite" (G.R. Beasley Murray, *Baptism in the NT*, p.303). As J.D.G. Dunn states,

In Gal. 3 Paul specifically argues that membership of Christ does not derive from physical descent or depend on a ritual act (circumcision), but comes through faith and is dependent on nothing other than faith and on the gift of the Spirit received through faith ("Baptism", *The New Bible Dictionary*, p. 123).

Several sections in the New Testament clearly, and emphatically, summarize this new covenant perspective. In fact, the section Romans 10:8-10 is actually a "definition" of the new covenant "word of

faith" which brings salvation to those who believe. Paul's attitude is clearly set forth, among many other places, in Galatians:

But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love (Gal. 5:5-6).

Any discussion of baptism today simply must keep in mind the reality of the higher unifying principles of faith in Christ and the seal of God's Spirit. Failure to recognize these principles almost guarantees division and makes the likelihood of coming to a resolution of differences on this subject almost impossible. The New Testament Scholar G.R. Beasley Murray, who is himself a strong advocate of "believer's baptism", nevertheless, states the following cautionary words in his book *Baptism in the New Testament* (p. 301-302):

Allowance must be made for the freedom of God in bestowing the Spirit, since God exercises that freedom. The Day of Pentecost itself provides a supreme example of this freedom ... One point is made abundantly clear by the evidence of Acts, namely that life is more complicated than formulations of doctrine and the Lord is able to look after the exigencies of life outside the range of formulas. This lesson is of incalculable importance for the modern Church, for the Church has become engulfed in a complication of life of such proportions as to make the divergencies of belief and practice in the New Testament Church of small account. For years the Churches have been confused in their thought and practice of baptism; but in the mercy of God the Church is still the Church and not another body! God is still able to take care of the exigencies beyond the formulas! The Apostolic doctrine of baptism remains for our instruction and as our ideal (**we deceive ourselves if we think we reproduce it in our Churches**), but manifestly it is wrong to put a construction on it that can neither take account of the realities existing in the first generation of the Church nor come to terms with those existing in ours.

The truth is that none of us today knows for certain all the details about New Testament water baptism. The biblical data is simply mixed and unclear and nowhere is its practice explicitly explained. In such cases, the "higher principles" of faith in Christ and the corresponding gift of God's

Spirit should govern our relationships with each other - not dogmatism or the pharisaic attitude of "religious correctness" which the entire Bible, especially Jesus and Paul, roundly condemns.

Having been born into and raised in a Christian family and then baptized as a young adult I can use myself as a typical example of many today. Though my baptism may have been somewhat meaningful, it in no way occurred at the time I became a Christian. My faith in Christ and discipleship in following him long preceded this; and, if I had never been baptized I would certainly not be any less a Christian today. Though I've grown in my understanding, sometimes radically, of many Christian doctrines and practices, the fact remains that I've been a Christian from my earliest years - not from the moment of my baptism.

In addition, the home churches or fellowships in which many of us today participate are made up of people who have been baptized at different ages, under the banner of many different denominational labels; and, many have not been baptized with water at all. Yet there is certainly no way that one would know who has, or has not, been baptized with water unless one were to ask. It is simply irrelevant to our fellowships - what binds us all together is our common faith in Christ and the Spirit of God.

If we are to re-capture the vitality of earliest Christianity we simply must recognize that the times in which we live today are vastly different from NT times. It is the "higher principles" that must be exalted; not the imitation of every first century practice. In earliest Christianity there was a common understanding of the practice of baptism; today there certainly is not. In the light of the multiplicity of divergent belief systems and practices pertaining to baptism today could one really believe that the "God who knows the heart" would judge an individual on the basis of his or her practice of baptism? This would hardly be in accord with the character of the God of the Bible - or, with the explicit testimony of the New Testament documents. In the new covenant era "*everyone* who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (I John 5:1). It is only the seal of God's Spirit which each believer in Christ receives that binds us all together as part of God's family.

In conclusion, I will only say that I do not necessarily expect everyone to agree with me on all

of these matters. However, I do urge - as with all matters on which there are honest differences amongst equally committed believers - that each individual, church or fellowship proceed according to that which they believe best exemplifies the "spirit" of the New Testament teaching on this subject. And, let this be without "judging" or "despising" those whose consciences lead them to different conclusions - for those conclusions are born out of each believer's own commitment to Christ as Lord. Ultimately, it is to him, not to each

other, that we must one day "give account" (cp. Rom. 14).

[Recommended studies on this topic include J.D.G. Dunn's article "Baptism" in *The New Bible Dictionary* and his very detailed and Greek-laden book *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*. Also, though principally concerned with other issues, *Gospel and Spirit* by Gordon Fee. All are available through CBD, ph. 1-508-977-5000]