

“The Art of Dunking in Baptist Life:  
A Case for Believer’s Baptism by Immersion”

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In just a moment, I want you to close your eyes and think about something. You won’t have to close them for long. Are you ready? Think about the greatest dunk you have ever witnessed. Now close your eyes and marvel for a few moments!

If you are like me, when you think of a dunk, you immediately have a sense of excitement and joy. You may think of the crowd and how praise fills the air every time a dunk occurs. Even though I have witnessed the rim-rattling aura of a Dwight Howard dunk, and long before his predecessors Wilt Chamberlain, Julius Erving, Michael Jordan and company popularized the dunk, Baptists have been dunking since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Obviously, I’m not talking about basketball (I’m not even talking about cookies and donuts—our waistlines give us away!), but I’m speaking of dunking new believers in the Lord Jesus Christ into baptismal waters.

Such dunks get Baptists excited. Dunking new believers helps us forget, at least momentarily, our petty battles in business meetings. Witnessing dunks helps us tolerate a worship service that pushes past the noon hour. Watching a family member or friend take the plunge floods our minds with memories about our own conversion and subsequent baptism, filling our hearts with gratitude toward God.

But why make a fuss over and insist on dunking? Cannot sprinkling or pouring accomplish the same thing? And why not cover as many people as possible, starting when people are infants? Doesn’t it confer some special grace (and which of us couldn’t receive a little extra helping of that)?

Baptists' insistence on baptism (dunking) goes back to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, a few decades after the initial Protestant Reformation. The central argument concerning believer's baptism by immersion has never been history or tradition but the very Word of God (though this work will reference some Baptist historians, theologians, and preachers, the primary source is the Bible.) This article argues that the Baptist view of believer's baptism by immersion is first and foremost a biblical position. Any other argument must subject itself to God's Word.

From a biblical perspective, I will argue that baptism is for believers only and that it is always by immersion. This article should help us keep "dunking" as a major expression of our Baptist faith and practice.

### **Believer's Baptism**

The first truth I believe the Bible underscores about this subject is that baptism is for believers. We call this kind of baptism "credo-baptism."

### **Belief Always Precedes Baptism**

It is fair to say that the Bible connects baptism with faith, in a way that faith *always* precedes baptism. Though space does not permit me to include every passage of Scripture, numerous texts share baptism of believers in common. People who received the gospel message expressed their belief in Christ through baptism. The baptism of believers occurred in Jerusalem (Acts 2:38-41), Samaria (8:12), Damascus (9:17-18), Caesarea (10:47-48), Galatia (Acts 13-14 in light of Galatians 3:26-27; 1 Peter 1:1; 3:21), Philippi (16:14-15, 31-33), Corinth (18:8; see also 1 Corinthians 1:2, 13-16), Ephesus (19:4-5; see also Ephesians 4:5), Rome (Romans 6:3-11), and Colosse (Colossians 2:11-12).

This believer's baptism is important, because there is no Scriptural argument for infant baptism (even acknowledged by R.C. Sproul, who sprinkles infants)<sup>1</sup> for "household" baptisms

(see Acts 10:44-48; 16:31-34) don't necessitate infants (argument from silence) and baptism is always of believers. As a side note, someone claiming to be "baptized as a baby" is a misnomer, because it was not immersion (you could drown a baby if you dunked him—more on baptism as immersion below) and it was not as a believer (infants do not have the capacity to believe), so it was not baptism.

A short tract has made its way around to several Baptist pastors. The tract is entitled "What the Bible Says about Infant Baptism." As one opens the single-folded tract, there is nothing inside! On the back of this tract the reader can find this quote from a Presbyterian: "If some intelligent being from Mars should visit. . . and we hand him our Bible. . . he would learn of the great doctrine and practices of the Christian religion without any other aid. He would find the Lord's Supper, the organization of the church, with elders and deacons, and ADULT BAPTISM, but it is safe to say he would never get it into his head that little children are to be baptized. He would not find infant baptism in the Bible because it is not there and cannot be gotten out of the Bible."<sup>2</sup> Now, if one cannot find infant baptism (paedo-baptism) in the Bible, why would he practice it?

### **New Covenant Believers in the New Testament Took on Water Baptism**

On another related issue, the Bible *never* speaks of a new covenant believer who has not professed his faith through baptism. Part of the disciples' mission was to baptize those who had been taught Christ (Matthew 28:19). Baptism was (and is) an essential part of Christian discipleship; it was inconceivable for a person in the 1<sup>st</sup> century to become a Christian and not get baptized. Just to be crystal clear: baptism is *not* essential for salvation, or it would be seen as a work, but it is important because it is tied to the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection. New Testament believers expressed their belief in Christ through baptism.

## **Baptism Is By Immersion**

Not only should one realize that baptism is for believers, but a second truth about baptism in the Bible is that it is by immersion.

### **The Meaning of Baptism**

The meaning of “baptism” is immerse, dip, plunge, or even dunk. The passive of the verb “baptize” was used of ships that sunk. Non-Baptist believers who argue that baptism can be via sprinkling beg the question: “Can a little water sprinkled over a ship cause it to sink?”

An important point to bring up here is that the word “baptism” is not a translation but a transliteration, probably because English churches in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (the dates for most of the earliest English Bible translations) had carried much of their ecclesiology over from Roman Catholic practices. 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestants had kept the word “baptize” (from Greek) because their practice had allowed for modes other than total submersion to be used. Baptists addressed this matter of baptism when they came on the scene in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

The Bible clearly has immersion in mind with the use of “baptism.” The people who came to John the Baptist found him at the “river Jordan” (Matthew 3:6). Why would John use a river for baptism if merely a few drops would suffice? Likewise, the Bible says, “John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there” (John 3:23). Again, why would John be baptizing in a place with “plentiful water” if a cup or pitcher of water would have been an ample supply?

Moreover, the Scriptures describe the recipients of baptism in terms of being immersed, or dunked. Matthew 3:16 says Jesus “went up” from the water during His baptism. When reading Acts 8:36, 38, why would the Ethiopian eunuch make a big deal about coming to water if the water in his canteen would have been adequate?<sup>4</sup> The text also says they “went down” and “came

up.” Can the reader think of any other possible mode of baptism to fit this language than that of immersion? Furthermore, why would the Philippian jailer and his family leave their house for baptism if just a little water could have done the job (Acts 16:32-34)? These examples underscore the exclusive meaning of baptism as immersion (dunking).

Someone may object: “Baptism does not always refer to water baptism in the New Testament.” Agreed. Baptism sometimes occurs as a metaphor for Christ’s suffering and crucifixion (Mark 10:38-40). The question to ask, however, is this: “Was Jesus completely immersed by God’s wrath or sprinkled by it?” The fact that God set Christ forward as a propitiation reveals that Jesus bore the full wrath of God in His sacrifice (Romans 3:25).<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, baptism may refer to baptism in the Spirit. One should ask, “Does a new believer get a little bit of the Spirit sprinkled on him or does the Lord immerse the new believer in the Spirit so that he is completely affected by Him?”<sup>6</sup> Baptism can even refer to washing one’s hands (Mark 7:4), but the Jews would plunge their hands in a basin of water to wash them, so still here baptism means to submerge.

### **The Message of Baptism**

In addition to the meaning of baptism, one should not overlook the message of baptism. Baptism shows and proclaims Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection as well as your identity in Christ in dying to your old life, being buried with Him, and being raised to walk a new quality of life. The Apostle Paul says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-4). Related passages where baptism signifies at least one element of Christ’s death, burial, or resurrection include Colossians 2:12-14; 1 Corinthians

15:29; 1 Peter 3:21. Baptism, then, is truly a gospel ordinance, for it is a command ordained by Christ that represents the gospel message of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

Advocates of pouring have sought to retain this message by saying, "In the case of sprinkling, the water being poured over the head of the person represents the death of Jesus. The water running off represents the resurrection of Jesus."<sup>7</sup> But this is not the same thing, for the picture is reversed from the subject in the water to the water on the subject. The Scriptures *always* speak of the believer acting in the water (going down, coming up, etc.) and *never* talk of the water acting on the believer (pouring over, running off). Moreover, in no instance in the Scriptures does one read of water being brought to baptize the believer but the believer goes to the water to get baptized. Thus, the believer dipped and raised in water shows death, burial, and resurrection and the believer in any other mode simply does not express that gospel truth.

Numerous confessions of faith in Baptist life have pointed to the meaning and message of baptism in the same way that the Scriptures present them. An example from the 17<sup>th</sup> century includes "A Declaration of Faith of English People" (1611). This statement connects baptism with confession of faith as well as the outward sign of one's dying to sin and walking in newness of life.<sup>8</sup> Also, the "First London Confession" (1644) describes baptism as "an Ordinance of the new Testament, given by Christ, to be dispensed onely upon persons professing faith, or that are Disciples, or taught, who upon a profession of faith, ought to be baptized" and "the way and manner of the dispensing of this Ordinance the Scripture holds out to be dipping or plunging the whole body under water," signifying the gospel.<sup>9</sup>

18<sup>th</sup> century Baptist life continued to propagate this belief about baptism. The Philadelphia Confession (1742) added a couple of articles to the "Second London Confession" (1689), but retained the language about baptism, stating that "those who do actually profess

repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to our Lord Jesus, are the only proper subjects of this ordination [ordinance]” and “immersion, or dipping of the person in water, is necessary to the due administration of this ordinance.”<sup>10</sup> The “Articles of Religion of the New Connexion” (1770) declare “that it is the indispensable duty of all who repent and believe the gospel, to be baptized, by immersion in water.”<sup>11</sup>

An example from the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the “New Hampshire Confession” (1833), which declares “that Christian Baptism is the immersion of a believer in water . . . to show . . . our faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour.”<sup>12</sup> The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, under the pen of Basil Manly, Jr., adopted *The Abstract of Principles* (1859), which state, “Baptism is an ordinance of the Lord Jesus, obligatory upon every believer, wherein he is immersed in water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, as a sign of his fellowship with the death and resurrection of Christ, of remission of sins, and of his giving himself up to God, to live and walk in newness of life.”<sup>13</sup>

One of the best expressions of Baptist faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries comes from Southern Baptists’ own *Baptist Faith & Message* (1925, 1963, 2000). This confession states that “Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer’s faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Savior, the believer’s death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. It is a testimony to his faith in the final resurrection of the dead.”<sup>14</sup>

Again, let it be said that history, tradition, and even confessions of faith, as helpful as they may be, never carry the same weight as the biblical witness. This appeal to Baptist confessions simply underscores what the Bible says about believer’s baptism by immersion.

## **The Model for Baptism**

The greatest focus in the discussion on believer's baptism by immersion are the questions of "who?" and "how?" Often overlooked is the question "by whom?" This issue hones in on the model for baptism: one committed Christian baptizing one who is committing himself to Christ through a public confession. The Great Commission and the recorded baptisms in Scripture show believers as responsible for carrying out the ordinance, whether it be the original disciples (Matthew 28:16-20), Philip (Acts 8:38), Paul, or other believers (1 Corinthians 1:12-16).<sup>15</sup>

## **The Mandate for Baptism**

While the model for baptism addresses the question "by whom?", the mandate for baptism answers the question "when?" In the Bible, those who received the Word were apparently baptized immediately. When Peter preached at Pentecost, "those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls (Acts 2:41). Similarly, the Ethiopian eunuch seems to have been baptized shortly after hearing the good news about Jesus (8:35-38). Other immediate responses of baptism to one's conversion include Paul, a.k.a. Saul (9:17-18), Cornelius and his household (10:47-48), Lydia and her household (16:14-15), and the Philippian jailer and his household (16:32-33).

Ultimately, baptism is an issue of obedience to our Lord. How many parents like to tell their kids something to do and then watch them postpone it? Adults often want their children to respond immediately—NOW! What makes people think that the Lord wants them to delay their obedience to His command?<sup>16</sup>

Now, someone may begin to think, "Does the way we understand baptism make us better than other denominations that sprinkle or pour?" No, but our stance is the biblical position and other modes place history and tradition over Scripture. Furthermore, when considering church



history, in is inescapable to observe that baptisteries in ancient churches from the first few centuries were not little bowls or pitchers but huge pools. Surely immersion was far more common than non-Baptist groups care to admit.

### **A Test Case—Clarity about Christ in Matthew 3:13-17**

With all of that said about baptism, one begins to see the real meaning and message about Christian baptism, not to mention what may very well have been in the mind of Matthew in recording Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3. Take a moment to read the text:

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.  
14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; 17 and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Some would say that baptism has little to do with the meaning of Matthew 3:13-17, but hang in there for a moment. Clearly, as seen in the above argument, baptism portrays the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (cf. Romans 6:3). Matthew may very well record Jesus' baptism to foreshadow His death and resurrection. Sprinkling or pouring as "baptism" fails to make sense of the gospel truth of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. The reader of Matthew's Gospel knows that Matthew has already alluded to Jesus' death in 1:21—"He will save His people from their sins," where salvation from sins points to a sacrifice by death. Moreover, the myrrh as a gift in 2:11 may also refer to the burial spice. This author simply mentions these items to point out that it is not unlikely that Matthew records an event or saying to foreshadow his ultimate purpose—to prove to Jews (and Gentiles) that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ.

God can say He is "well-pleased" with His Son (Matthew 3:17) because Jesus obeyed Him even unto death (Philippians 2:6-8). The Bible says it pleased the LORD to crush Him

(Isaiah 53:10). On another note, when Matthew cites the voice of God the Father from heaven, he incorporates two messianic texts from the Old Testament—“this is My Son” (from Psalm 2:7) and “My Beloved, in Whom I am well-pleased” (from Isaiah 42:1b). These two messianic texts combine the Divine Son of Psalm 2 with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 42-53 into one Person.

The Apostle Paul, like Matthew, recognized that God’s declaration is powerful, for God declared Jesus to be the Son of God through His resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4). Therefore, the voice from heaven citing Scripture reveals how central Jesus is within God’s plan. No one can reject Jesus, who is the Christ via His baptism (death-burial-resurrection), and be pleasing to the Father!

So the imperative that Matthew is building toward for his readers from this text dealing with the baptism of Jesus Christ is to *believe in Jesus Christ, once-crucified-yet-risen and then be baptized to declare your faith in Christ as Lord*. Now the reader does not get all of that simply by reading up to Matthew 3, but when he understands baptism biblically, he cannot help but come to that kind of conclusion.

The reason this response is important is because God has placed His seal of approval on Jesus, and the only way one can receive God’s seal of approval and hear “Well done, good and faithful servant” is to align with Jesus Christ, for God has placed His seal of approval on Him and accepts all those who are in Him (cf. Luke 2:14; 2 Timothy 2:19).

### **Conclusion—The Older Baptists Get, the More They Dunk**

Other Protestant denominations call Baptists “people of the Book,” because Baptists, more than any other group of Christians, continually go back to the Bible for matters of faith and practice. History and tradition will never replace biblical authority for every genuine Baptist.

The Baptist commitment to the Bible helps the reader understand their position on believer's baptism by immersion. That same commitment drives Baptists to evangelize the world, for without hearing the gospel of Christ, none can be saved. Whenever people from various tribes, tongues, and nations receive the gospel, Baptists do what they do best—dunk them in baptismal waters. With more than 1 million baptisms worldwide in 2007, it surely seems that Baptists are able to fight off the effects of age. Baptists are 400 years old and counting. May dazzling dunks continue to be the high marks of Baptist life.

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<sup>1</sup>R. C. Sproul writes, “The first direct mention of infant baptism is around the middle of the second century A.D.” (*Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992], 228). Of course, Sproul does not make the same appeals to early church history for development of the Eucharist tradition or apostolic succession. While history and tradition can help shed light on our understanding of biblical issues, they should never be allowed to usurp clear biblical teachings.

<sup>2</sup>A. Pieters, *Why We Baptize Infants*, 8.

<sup>3</sup>Several early Baptist writings on believer's baptism and/or baptism by immersion from the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century are in H. Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), including John Smyth, *The Character of the Beast* (1609); “A Declaration of Faith of English People” (1611); Edward Barber, *A Small Treatise on Baptisme, or Dipping* (1641); Christopher Blackwood, *The Storming of Antichrist* (1644); “The First London Confession” (1644); and “The Kiffin Manuscript” (ca. 1640s).

A few additional works the reader may find helpful that trace these issues include Abraham Booth, *An Apology for the Baptists: In Which They Are Vindicated From the Imputation of Laying an Unwarrantable Stress on the Ordinance of Baptism* (Boston: Manning and Loring, 1808); William H. Whitsitt, *A Question in Baptist History* (Louisville: Chas. T. Dearing, 1896); J. M. Carroll, *The Trail of Blood* (Lexington, KY: Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, 1931); and Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, eds., *Believers Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006).

<sup>4</sup>Now the text does not say the Ethiopian eunuch had a canteen with him, but he would certainly not make the long trip without some sort of liquid, including water, to quench his thirst.

<sup>5</sup>For a defense of “propitiation,” see Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 144-213.

<sup>6</sup>Galatians 3:27 may refer to Spirit baptism, water baptism, or both. A study of conversion in the New Testament church reveals that Spirit baptism and water baptism went hand-in-hand (not in terms of water baptism as a work for salvation, but in terms of it being unheard for a recipient of God's Spirit not expressing that new life through water baptism. See John B. Polhill, “Acts” in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 116-117.

<sup>7</sup>Paraphrase of Charles R. Swindoll, *Growing Deep in the Christian Life: Essential Truths for Becoming Strong in the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 363.

<sup>8</sup>Articles 13 and 14 in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 120.

<sup>9</sup>Articles XXXIX and XL in Lumpkin, 167. The original language has been retained in several of the quotations, resulting in modern-day misspellings.

<sup>10</sup>Chapter 30, points 2 and 4 in *Philadelphia Baptist Confession of Faith* (Asheville, NC: Revival Literature, 2007, reprint edition), 65.

<sup>11</sup>Article 6 in Lumpkin, 344.

<sup>12</sup>Article xiv in Lumpkin, 366.

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<sup>13</sup>Quoted from B. Spencer Haygood, *The Faith: A Commentary on the Abstract of Principles, Introduction*, Revised ed. (Campobello, SC: Jackson Memorial Baptist Church, 1995), 27-28.

<sup>14</sup>*The Baptist Faith & Message*, “Article VII. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper” (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2000), 14. The quotation comes from both the 1963 and 2000 editions (identical in language). The 1925 version is slightly shorter than its successors. For comparisons of the three editions, see <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfmcomparison.asp>.

<sup>15</sup>Although I appreciate the influence of J. R. Graves and the Landmark Baptist movement on highlighting the importance of baptizers having been immersed themselves, the Landmark Baptists’ insistence on the validity of one’s baptism being tied up in an unbroken chain of succession back to the New Testament seems unfounded and impossible to prove.

<sup>16</sup>Though outside the scope of this work, one could add that the New Testament teaches that baptism is the entrance into the church. The New Testament has numerous examples where groups of people believe the gospel, express that belief through baptism, and then those baptized believers form a church. The Book of Acts records how several churches got their start, and when we compare the Acts’ accounts with some of the epistles written to the churches, we get a pretty clear picture of how the belief-baptism-church issues are intricately linked together. This kind of order among churches, comprised of baptized believers, are found in Jerusalem (Acts 2:38, 41→v. 47); Pontus, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bythynia (Acts 2:9, 38, 41→1 Peter 1:1; 3:21); places like Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra, all of which were in the region of Galatia (Acts 13-14; 16:1-5→Galatians 3:27; 1 Peter 1:1; 3:21); Philippi (Acts 16:14-15, 31-34→Philippians); Corinth (Acts 18:8→1 Corinthians 1:12-16); Ephesus (Acts 19:1-5→Ephesians 4:5); and Rome (Acts 2:10, 38, 41→Romans 6:3-11). This impressive list of New Testament churches should set the record straight about baptism’s connection to the church.

Baptist confessions have also noted that “a New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers. . .” (*The Baptist Faith & Message* [2000], “VI. The Church,” 13).