

Is Baptism Really Necessary?



A supplementary study by Paul and Sarah Holloway

Do I Really Need To Be Baptised?

Introduction

In the Churches of Christ, we have argued this point with many denominations and have received much opposition from people because of our belief that a person has to be baptised to be saved. To understand the issues, we really need to look at the history of baptism both before and after the New Testament era. I have advocated the necessity of baptism many times. The opposition to this standpoint usually becomes so impassioned as to end in threats of violence. What could make people so upset about the simple statement that a person should be baptised to be saved?

Dedication

As several people have expressed concern regarding the subject of baptism and its link with salvation, I have prepared this document to reassure and encourage disciples about the urgent need for baptism following repentance. Many people have given their lives over to the Lord and have shown great humility in accepting the hard teaching that we need to be baptized in order to be forgiven. To those who have sacrificed so much over the years and given so much of their lives to Christ and to all true believers in Jesus' promise that everyone who believes and is baptized will be saved (Mark 16:16), I humbly dedicate this article.

Chapter 1 Scripture Vs Sentimentality.

Jesus spoke to Nicodemus and said,

In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." John 3:3 NIV

Nicodemus didn't understand this concept although he was well aware of the scriptures. So Nicodemus had to ask how a person could be born again.

To which Jesus answered:

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'" John 3:5-7 NIV

Nicodemus spoke the same language as Jesus so he did not have a language barrier to overcome. Nicodemus was well aware of the Torah, Nevium, Ketium, Mishnah, Midrash, and even the esoteric Kabbalah, how then could Nicodemus have failed to associate the new life that comes from re-birth through the water of cleansing as prophesied in Ezekiel 36:25-26.

Nicodemus also could not have failed to hear about John's baptism for repentance. I don't believe that Nicodemus was stupid or slow so that he didn't understand what Jesus was telling him, I think the issue for Nicodemus was the horrific consequences of Jesus' message.

For a long time, the Jews had been looking forward to the coming of a messiah that would liberate them from the Roman occupation in much the same way as the Hasmonean dynasty liberated the Jews from the evil oppression under Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The Jews under Roman occupation believed that God was temporarily chastising them in much the same way as he did under the Babylonian captivity. Nicodemus would have firmly believed that Judea was the kingdom of God and God's throne was in the Holy of Holies in the Temple at Jerusalem. How then could Jesus be saying that the citizens of the Kingdom of God could not enter the kingdom of God without baptism? Surely Nicodemus' loved ones and family and friends and countrymen were already in the kingdom of God but Jesus was implying that he and all his friends and family and loved ones including some who had passed away were not already part of God's kingdom. This was such a horrible concept that Nicodemus refused to accept it and sought clarification from Jesus. Nicodemus was hoping that somehow he must have misunderstood Jesus.

This is the reason why people become so upset about the doctrine of baptism. If we simply told people that it was a good thing to do and was just an outward expression of an inward change, more people would partake in the ritual. However that is not the message Jesus gave as recorded in the gospel of John. Jesus implied that if you are not baptised, you are not saved (Mark 16:16). If all the people of Israel were already in a covenant relationship with God and simply needed to believe that Jesus was their atoning sacrifice to be saved, do you think three thousand people would have got baptised in one day? Would you stand in line while 2,999 people got baptised ahead of you if you thought there was some other way you could be forgiven?

So the real issue is sentimentality. The biggest objection to baptism being essential for salvation is the feeling of utter helplessness and responsibility that comes from knowing that people who you care deeply about might not be saved. This feeling did not escape the early Christians, which is why Peter pleaded so earnestly with people to save themselves from this corrupt generation (Acts 2:40). This is why the disciples were prepared to sacrifice everything, including their lives, for the sake of bringing the gospel to as many people as would listen. The only thing that would produce such commitment was a deep sense of love and a deep understanding that their loved ones were destined for hell. Do you remember how earnest you were to help everyone when you were first baptised? This is the fire that moved the early church. This is the same conviction that we need to feel if we are to bring our church back to life.

In an attempt to confuse the issue, advocates of faith alone try to appeal to scriptures to justify their belief. The belief that we can be saved without baptism comes from a misunderstanding of scriptures like Romans 3:21, "*But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*"

Another scripture that is misquoted is Galatians 5:1 "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." To further their argument advocates of faith alone take the silence of some of the scriptures in Acts. For instance:

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you--even Jesus. Acts 3:19-20 and of course: They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household." Acts 16:31 NIV

These arguments are extremely weak Galatians and Romans are talking about the Old Testament not the New and you can't forge a doctrine on silence especially when confronted with the overwhelming evidence of the rest of the scriptures. People who advocate faith alone have to resort to incredible lengths to justify their position, even refuting the authority of scripture. Martin Luther called James the epistle of straw. We will now examine some of that overwhelming evidence that supports the scriptural, yet unpopular, position that baptism is indeed essential for salvation.

In defence of Baptism – an argument by language:

The word under discussion is βαπτω, or βαπτίζω to use its more familiar variant. Linguistically the word Baptism means to dip or immerse but conveys the sense of being overwhelmed. In Homeric poetry several centuries before Christ, the word βαπτίζω was used to describe someone who was completely legless, literally baptised in wine. The word was also used to denote dying as in wool that had been dipped in dye for the purpose of dying. This is no idle dip but a soaking. Furthermore, the word Baptism can refer to the process of dipping a red hot iron into cold water and the temper that this produces (Baptised iron). The word is also used in the Apocrypha to mean taking a bath. So much for the classical Homeric, Apocryphal and modern references.

Now we all know that the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. However after the conquest of Palestine by Alexander the Great, Greek became the common language spoken by everyone. In order not to lose the Hebrew language a group of Hebrew Scholars invented a form of pronunciation sounds that could be written around the Hebrew (similar to vowels in English). This “pointed” text is referred to as the Masoretic Text from the Masorites (Hebrew for Tradition) who invented the system of sounds. This was fine for the elite scholars but not for the common folk. The Jews had by far the greatest amount of literacy of all the peoples of the ancient world almost everyone could read the scriptures. With more and more people learning Greek, however, and falling behind in Hebrew, a group of seventy scholars translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek. From the number seventy we derive the name of their translation, which is called the Septuagint. The Septuagint then is the earliest Greek translation of the Old Testament. In case some people doubt the reliability of the Septuagint, it should at this stage be mentioned that the Septuagint is the bible that Jesus and the early Christians read from and quoted.

The Septuagint also contains the Greek words for all the apocrypha (hidden) books of the Old Testament. Even the Jews did not accept these books as inspired but they are useful from a historical perspective.

In Judith 12:7, we read that every night Judith washed at the spring in the valley of Bethulia. The Greek word for washed used in Judith 12:7 in the Septuagint is of course βαπτίζω (lit. was baptized) Please note this was not a baptism for the forgiveness of sins or a ceremonial washing, merely an immersion in water for the purpose of cleansing the body from external dirt and dust, in short a bath.

In Job 9:31, Job describes himself as being plunged into a slime pit, the word for plunged is of course baptism.

Again in Joshua 3:15 we read that the flood waters parted as the priests foot touched the water's edge. The actual word is Baptism, when their foot was baptised (immersed) in the water's edge the waters were parted.

In Ruth 2:14 Boaz tells her to dip her bread in some wine vinegar – yes the word dip is βαπτω in Greek.

As we read further into the Old Testament, we see other references to Baptism meaning dip or immerse, among them are 1 Sam 19:27 where Jonathan dips his rod in the honey, 2 Kings 8:15 where Hazel soaks a cloth in water, in Psalms 68:23 David talks about plunging his feet in the blood of his enemies. In both Daniel 4:33 and Daniel 5:21 we read that Nebuchadnezzar's body was drenched in the dew of heaven and yes you guessed it the Greek word is the same as the one in the New Testament that refers to Baptism.

So the word Baptism is a common word among the Greeks that just means to dip or immerse or to be overwhelmed or soaked or plunged.

Table 1: Translations of Baptism Used in the Old Testament.

Greek Word	Example	NIV Translation
βαφαντες	Ex 12:22	"dip"
βαφει	Lev 4:6, Lev 14:6 Lev 14:16 Lev 14:51 Num 19:18	"dip"
εβαφει	Lev 9:9	"dipped"
βαφησεται	Lev 11:32	"put it in" [water]
εβαφησαν	Josh 3:15	"touched"
βαφεις	Ruth 2:14	"dip"
εβαψεν	1 Sam 14:27 2 Kings 8:15	"dipped" "soaked"
εβαπτισατο	2 Kings 5:14	"dipped"
εβαψαζ	Job 9:31	"plunged"
βαφηι (in ancient Greek the iota "ι" at the end of βαφηι is written under the eta "η")	Psalms 68:23	"plunge"
εβαφη	Dan 4:30 LXX* Dan 4:33 NIV* Dan 5:21 *(NB sometimes verse numberings are different in the Septuagint (LXX) than in the NIV)	"drenched"

Chapter 2. The Background and Birth of Baptism.

The LORD said to Moses, "Take vengeance on the Midianites for the Israelites. After that, you will be gathered to your people." Num 31:1-2

Now the Lord brought about a great victory but the soldiers were ceremonially unclean following the victory (anyone who touches a dead person is ceremonially unclean) all the articles that they had plundered was likewise ceremonially unclean. Eleazar the priest met with the people and gave them these instructions:

Then Eleazar the priest said to the soldiers who had gone into battle, "This is the requirement of the law that the LORD gave Moses: Gold, silver, bronze, iron, tin, lead and anything else that can withstand fire must be put through the fire, and then it will be clean. But it must also be purified with the water of cleansing. And whatever cannot withstand fire must be put through that water. On the seventh day wash your clothes and you will be clean. Then you may come into the camp." Numbers 31:21-24

Passing something that cannot be purified in fire through Water is a system of purification that the Jews have been well aware of from the days in the desert, now we know from the Old Testament that there are three ways that something unclean can be made clean. A person or object is cleansed either through water or through fire or through blood. Jesus fulfilled all of these requirements. He was said to baptise with water and with fire and he shed his own blood on the cross. We can see that Ceremonial washing was nothing new to the Levitical priesthood. The Ceremonial washing required the immersion in water of the thing that was to be cleansed.

The link between the Passover and the Last Supper has been made all too obvious by God and we make a point of reminding people every Sunday at communion. The goal of the last supper was to prepare the disciples for Jesus' passion that was to follow and to give the disciples something for all Christians to remember the huge sacrifice Jesus made. We know that baptism is a taking part in the death burial and resurrection of Jesus (Rom 6:3-4, Col 2:12) but did you also know that the Greek word for baptism is also in the Exodus story?

Now a short recap. So far, we have seen that fire is important for cleansing, we have also seen that water is necessary for cleansing and lastly that blood is essential for cleansing. These three elements are combined into one in what is called the waters of cleansing. Now a little about the waters of cleansing.

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron: "This is a requirement of the law that the LORD has commanded: Tell the Israelites to bring you a red heifer without defect or blemish and that has never been under a yoke. Give it to Eleazar the priest; it is to be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. Then Eleazar the priest is to take some of its blood on his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the Tent of Meeting. While he watches, the heifer is to be burned--its hide, flesh, blood and offal. The

priest is to take some cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool and throw them onto the burning heifer. After that, the priest must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water. He may then come into the camp, but he will be ceremonially unclean till evening. The man who burns it must also wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he too will be unclean till evening.

"A man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer and put them in a ceremonially clean place outside the camp. They shall be kept by the Israelite community for use in the water of cleansing; it is for purification from sin. The man who gathers up the ashes of the heifer must also wash his clothes, and he too will be unclean till evening. This will be a lasting ordinance both for the Israelites and for the aliens living among them. Numbers 19:1-10 NIV

Now we see the three elements for Salvation present in the waters of cleansing. This is important to note, we need fire (the ashes of the heifer denote fire) the water and the blood (from the heifer). Now let us dwell a little on the importance of the blood.

Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. EX 12:22

Now there are a lot of New Testament similarities here, I will leave it to your own conscience and understanding to determine what is inspired prophecy and what is mere coincidence: The hyssop was the plant used to give the sponge soaked in wine vinegar to Jesus. The blood of the sacrificial lamb that was painted on the house reminds me of the blood of Christ. The process of dipping the hyssop in the blood and painting it on the door frames of the house so that the angel of death would pass over the house is reminiscent of us being dipped in the waters of baptism so that our souls come into contact with the blood of Christ. Just as people in the house that was covered in blood escaped divine judgement so that we too escape divine judgement because God sees our souls stained with the blood of Christ. In the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews goes so far as to say that without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness (Heb 9:22).

The Septuagint word often translated "dip" is used of ceremonial cleansing or rituals of some form of atonement or other in the following verses.

Lev 4:6 He is to dip his finger into the blood and sprinkle some of it seven times before the LORD. (Interestingly the word βαπτω [although the conjugation is βαφα] is used to refer to "dip" and not to "sprinkle".)

In Lev 4:17 He shall dip his finger into the blood and sprinkle it before the LORD seven times in front of the curtain.

In Lev 9:9: His sons brought the blood to him, and he dipped his finger into the blood and put it on the horns of the altar; the rest of the blood he poured out at the base of the altar. (Again βαφα is used with respect to the dipping not the pouring.)

In Lev 11:32: *When one of them dies and falls on something, that article, whatever its use, will be unclean, whether it is made of wood, cloth, hide or sackcloth. Put it in water; it will be unclean till evening, and then it will be clean.* The term “put it in” is... you guessed it βαφει.

In Lev 14:6, 14:16, 14:51 we see much of the same thing. The word which is spelled very similarly and pronounced similarly and carries an almost identical meaning and I am assured on good authority is derived from the same root is used throughout Leviticus to refer to ceremonial cleansing whether in blood or water or both.

I don't want to give you the impression that this is just for the book of Leviticus, although by nature of the book it is going to carry by far the most references since it was written to the priesthood for the purpose of explaining the role of the priest. In Numb 19:18, we read *Then a man who is ceremonially clean is to take some hyssop, dip it in the water and sprinkle the tent and all the furnishings and the people who were there.*

If anyone wants to talk about statistics, there are 7 references in the concordance of the Septuagint in Leviticus and only one in Exodus and only one in Numbers and none in Genesis. However since the concordance I read is not an exhaustive concordance it is not fair to say that those are the only references in the Torah, they are just the only references I could find.

Outside of the law of Moses there is only one reference in the writings which link Baptism to ceremonial cleansing, 2 Kings 5:14, is the famous cleansing of Naaman's leprosy.

Actually the passage in 2 Kings 5:14 is rather interesting. We used this passage a lot in bible studies comparing the washing of Naaman in the Jordan in obedience to God in order to be cleansed of his leprosy with our obedience to God's command through Peter to repent and be baptised. I wonder how many of you knew that the Greek word used to describe Naaman's washing in the Jordan is the same word as used when referring to John the Baptist baptising people in the Jordan?

Now how about the time between the testaments.

In the so-called silent years between the close of the Old Testament and the opening phrases of Matthew's Gospel, we have about 400 years of silence from the Holy Spirit. History didn't stop during this time however and we have a number of historical sources we can rely on for information about what happened. One of those sources is Flavius Josephus and another source is writings found in Qumran famously known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Both mention a group called the Essenes. This group practised ceremonial cleansing much the same way as the Old Testament describes. The primary difference between the Qumran communities cleansing and the baptism that John practised was that the ceremonial washing was self inflicted.

Outside of Josephus and the Dead Sea Scrolls, We also have the apocrypha to give us insights into the practices of the Jews between the close of the Old Testament and the opening of the New Testament.

Ecclesiasticus 34: 25 says, If someone washes after touching a corpse, and then touches it again, what is the good of his washing? Again, you guessed it, same Greek word as the one we use for Baptism.

Ceremonial washing then was nothing new to the Jews or the Essenes, according to the Tyndale commentary the practice of Proselyte baptism which was also self inflicted was practised by the Jews around the time of John the Baptist.

This word is not just used in the Old Testament however to refer to ceremonial washing. When John came baptising, he was not doing something that the Jews were unfamiliar with. The only thing is that the Jews believed that they were holy to the Lord though circumcision but that if a gentile that wanted to become Jewish (a proselyte) wanted to be circumcised, he must first be purified through the waters of baptism for repentance, then he would be able to be circumcised. What was so radical and irritating to the Jews was that John was baptising Jews, treating Jews who were God's holy people to the same indignity that they subjected the gentiles. By being baptised, the Jew who followed John the Baptist was effectively acknowledging publicly that his sin had made him just as unclean as the uncircumcised gentiles and he needed to be washed clean in baptism.

Chapter 3: The New Testament Teachings

In John 1:21-24, John the Baptist must have been doing something new and previously unheard of in order to attract the Pharisee's attention. If John's followers were simply having a bath because it was hot and dusty in the desert, it would not have attracted any attention from the authorities. Likewise, if John was practising ceremonial washing as prescribed in the Levitical laws or proselyte baptism that was practised widely in the time, or even initiating people into a separatist sect like the Essenes, it would hardly have deserved such a prominent position in the New Testament. No! The clue comes in Matt 3:6. What made John's ministry so special was that people were confessing their sins while being baptised. No one confesses their sins, unless they are seeking forgiveness. People were coming to be baptised because they wanted to be forgiven. In the minds of John's followers, baptism is what needed to be done in order to be forgiven.

NB: The link between ceremonial washing and baptism was not unnoticed by the Jews in John 3:25, an argument broke out between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew about ceremonial washing.

I have been asked that if John was indeed baptising Jews why didn't the Jewish leaders object? The answer, I give is that they did object. But before they objected to John baptising Jews, they first wanted to make sure that he was not the Elijah or the Prophet or the Christ in case fire fell down from heaven and consumed them. Once John had assured them that he was not going to kill them, they raised the objection to baptism.

Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John 1:24-25 NIV

John however promised that after him would come the one who could baptise in the Holy Spirit. I don't have time to discuss Holy Spirit Baptism save to say that Jesus was the one who came next and he taught his disciples to baptise just as John had in water. After Jesus was resurrected, the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost and that did not stop Peter exclaiming that the way the Jews should be saved was to repent and be baptised. Acts 2:38.

Before moving to the book of Acts, I would like to add that in Mark 16:16, Jesus says very clearly that "*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*"

Now, we already know John's baptism was for repentance and forgiveness of sins, so what was so special about Peter's declaration at Pentecost?

It was the promise of the Holy Spirit for all generations to come. Acts 2:39.

We read in no fewer than nine different places about people being baptized in the book of Acts. These places are:

Table 2: Baptisms in the book of Acts

Acts 2:41	-	3,000 at Pentecost
Acts 8:12	-	The Samaritan followers of Simon Magus
Acts 8:13	-	Simon himself
Acts 8:38	-	Ethiopian Eunuch
Acts 9:18	-	Saul (Paul)
Acts 10:47-48	-	Cornelius and all the gentiles in his house.
Acts 16:15	-	Lydia
Acts 16:33	-	The Jailer and his family.
Acts 18:8	-	Many in Corinth.
Acts 19:5	-	The Ephesian disciples.

Why would these people all have chosen to be baptized if it was just a public expression of faith or an outward sign of an inward change? Who was the Jailer trying to impress when he and his family were baptised in the middle of the night?

Moving on to the Letters:

The letters look back on baptisms and form a more solid doctrine on the issue. We know the guard the gospel scriptures so well that I don't feel there would be any point in dwelling on them.

Romans 6:3-4 refers to baptism as partaking in the death burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Colossians 2:12 links baptism with faith in the power of God who raised Jesus from the dead. It is faith that makes the difference between a baptism and a bath. In Ephesians 4:5 we learn that there is only one baptism. When studying guard the gospel it is customary to finish with Acts 22:16 to reinforce the sense of urgency "What are you waiting for."

In 1 Cor 10:2 Paul looks back at the Exodus where the Israelites were saved out of Egypt (symbolic elsewhere for sin) through baptism in the cloud and in the sea. Just as the Israelites were called out of Egypt to go to the promised land and were baptised into a covenant relationship with God so too we are called out of our sinful lives into a covenant relationship with God through baptism. Let's compare this with Col 2:11, circumcision is compared with repentance (putting off of the old self) and baptism cf. verse 12. Repentance and baptism then in Paul's mind are synonymous with entering into a covenant relationship with God.

Gal 3:27 refers to the baptised disciple as being clothed with Christ. This again is reminiscent of the blood of the Passover lamb covering our souls so that we escape judgement. When God sees us on the day of judgement he sees not our sins but Christ.

I would like to conclude this New Testament study on Baptism with the words of Peter.

...and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also--not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ 1 Peter 3:21 NIV

in one verse, Peter links water to baptism and salvation. The power of baptism is not the water but the resurrection. Without believing that I was spiritually taking part in the death burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ in my baptism, I would merely be taking a bath.

To answer the question, do we really need to be baptised to be saved? I think we need to answer with a categorical yes! The only slight concession is when a person hears the message and dies quickly before being given the chance to be baptised. Jesus' grace does indeed extend further than the letter of the law – the gospels make this abundantly clear. This then is how God deals with exceptional circumstances. A person, who knows that they need to be baptised and has the ability to be baptised, yet willfully and arrogantly rejects the grace of God through baptism, rejects the grace of God entirely.

This then was the belief of the first century Christians and the teaching of the apostles in the New Testament.

Some however have questioned the biblical accounts and tried to place different interpretations on the scriptures than what we have done and I will defend this interpretation in the next Chapter.

Table 3: Baptisms Old and New

Old Testament	Description	New Testament	Description
Prov 30 : 12	Cleansing of moral filth	1 Peter 3 :21	Water symbolizes baptism removes moral filth
2 Kings 5 :1-5	Naaman's leprosy	Acts 22 :16	What are you waiting for?
Lev 14 : 1-7	Various laws on cleansing	Eph 4 : 5	One Lord one Faith One Baptism
Isiah 1 : 18-20	Sins can be cleansed	Acts 2 : 38	Sins can be cleansed
Ezekiel 36 : 25-26	Prophecy	John 3 : 3	Fulfillment

Chapter 4: What the Early Christians Believed

The chief objection is that works can't save us. This is easily overcome because nowhere in the bible does it say that baptism is a work at all. New Testament Baptism is not something you do but something that is done to you by someone else. In humility, you simply let it happen and believe that you will be saved as a result.

Furthermore, the early Christians unanimously referred to baptism as a grace. The power of baptism is the resurrection not the water. But that does not get you off the hook, you still have to be baptised in water to receive the grace that the resurrection has brought you.

Since the early Christians (second century on) referred to baptism as a grace, the argument that we can't be saved through our works becomes totally invalid.

What advantages did the early Christians have over us in interpreting the Lord Jesus and the apostles' statements?

To answer this question, I would like to take 3 arguments from David W Bercot in his book "Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up"

Firstly, the advantage of time.

Tertullian (190AD-210AD) wrote. "I say that my gospel is the true one. Marcion says that his is. I say that Marcion's gospel is adulterated. He says mine is. Now how can we settle this stand off, unless we use the principle of time? According to this principle, authority lies with the one who is prior in time. It is based on the elemental truth that corruption of doctrine lies with the one who is shown to have originated later in time. Since error is falsification of truth, truth must necessarily precede error.

Tertullian's principle of time is one of the main criteria modern historians use to authenticate historical accounts. Salvation by faith alone was first taught by the Libertinists (a branch of gnosticism) but then disappeared largely from the scene until Luther resurrected it in 1522 at the diet of worms. Although his impassioned speech espoused the authority of scripture alone, in practice he meant his own interpretation of scripture alone and wrote lengthy introductions to his translations of the scriptures.

We have the disadvantage over the early Christians that the culminative effects of small changes to doctrine have clouded our view of the scriptures, whereas the early Christians so called church fathers had no such disadvantage to contend with.

The second major advantage that the church fathers or early Christians had over us was a lifetime's exposure to the same conditions, language and culture that the early church had. Ask yourself honestly, how well can you read Greek. The early Christians didn't just read the bible in Greek but they spoke it as their daily language and understood all the geographical references and the nuances of the words. Anybody can put the words Water

and Gate together and think that they know what Watergate means in English, but unless you lived around this century how could you possibly know the subtle nuances of the of the word? Is it just talking about a gate that lets water out of a dam? Or is it just the name of a hotel? Or are we talking about a scandal that forced a president to resign? The greatest scholars of our time who study Christianity cannot possibly hope to understand it as well as the early church fathers.

The last compelling advantage the early Christians had over us is the oral tradition that went on into the later part of the first and throughout the second and third centuries and was not really diluted until the end of the fourth century.

What was the Birmingham church doing in the April of 1988? How did it start, who was the first person to come up on the original pilot team? It will be hard to know exactly the answers to these questions in a thousand years time, but I can tell you because I was there. I can tell you exactly what happened in 1993 during the restoration of the church in Birmingham. Historians trying to piece together what happened might have more success if they were only one hundred years separated from the people who were present from the beginning than in a thousand years time when all memory of us is gone and only our written records remain.

So then bearing in mind that the early Christians knew more about what Jesus, Peter, Paul, James and John were talking about than all the modern scholars put together, let us look at their take on baptism and the relationship between baptism and children, the relationship between baptism and heresy and the relationship between baptism and salvation.

It is not permitted to baptise or hold a love feast independently of the Bishop. But whatever he approves, that is also well pleasing to God; that all your acts may be sure and valid. Ignatius letter to the Smyrnaeans. (ad50-100 AD) Ignatius like Polycarp was a disciple of John. Imagine being taught by the apostle John,

Justin Martyr executed in 165AD and was believed to have been converted by Polycarp who was himself a disciple of the same John who wrote Revelation.

I will explain how we also dedicated ourselves to God when we were made new through Christ; lest, if we omit this, we seem to be in any way unfair in our explanation. As many as are persuaded and believe that the things are true which are taught by us and said to be true and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their past sins, and we pray and fast with them. Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are born again in the same manner in which we were ourselves bom again. For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water. (Justin Martyr died 185AD)

Being Baptised we are enlightened, being enlightened, we are adopted as sons being adopted, we are made perfect, being made complete, we are made immortal Pedagogus I, vi (26) from Clement of Alexandria. C190AD

Polycarp was one of John's disciple and therefore a link to the apostle John himself. Polycarp's comments would be well worth listening to. Unfortunately we have little writings of Polycarp. However, Polycarp did teach Irenaeus. Irenaeus lived well past 200AD and forms an unbroken chain to the apostle John himself. Irenaeus was the disciple of Polycarp who was the disciple of the apostle John. Irenaeus wrote:

For I have a more vivid recollection of what occurred at the time than of recent events...; so that I can even describe the place where the blessed Polycarp used to sit and discourse – his going out too, and his coming in – his general mode of life and personal appearance, together with the discourses which he delivered to the people; also how he would speak of his familiar intercourse with John, and with the rest of those who had seen the Lord; and how he would call their words to remembrance. Whatsoever things he had heard from them respecting the Lord, both with regard to His miracles and His teaching, Polycarp having thus received from the eye-witnesses of the Word of life, would recount them all in harmony with the Scriptures.

I think that pretty much qualifies Irenaeus to tell me what John understood by the term baptism.

As dry flour cannot be united into a lump of dough, or a loaf, but needs moisture; so we who are many cannot be made one in Christ Jesus without the water that comes from heaven. And as dry earth does not produce fruit unless it receives moisture; so we, who are at first a dry tree, would never have yielded the fruit of life without the willing rain from above. For our bodies have received the unity which brings us to immortality, by means of the washing; our souls receive it by means of the spirit. Thus both of these are needed for together they advance mans progress towards the life of God. Irenaeus the sacraments. C 130ish

Irenaeus , again, somewhere between 130 AD and 200AD ish.

As we are lepers in sin, we are made clean from our old transgressions by means of the sacred water and the invocation of the Lord. We are thus spiritually regenerated as new-born infants, even as the Lord has declared: "Except a man be born again through water and the Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

Didache Date very controversial but quite early.

Baptise thus: having first recited all these things, baptise "in the name of the father, and of the son, and of the Holy Ghost," in running water. If you have no running water, baptise in other water; if you cannot baptise in cold water, use warm. If you have neither, pour water on the head thrice, "in the name of the father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit." Before baptism, the baptizer and the baptised should fast, and any others who can: and you must order the baptised to fast for a day or two. Didache (teaching of the apostles)

On Repentance after Baptism

Tertullian (c 190-210AD). On Repentance.

The poisons of his (i.e. the devil's), therefore, God foresaw, and although the gate of forgiveness has been shut and fastened with the bar of baptism, he has permitted some means of access. In the vestibule he has stationed the second repentance to open to such as knock...

His disciples used to baptise as his ministers, as John the forerunner had baptised before, and with the same baptism as John. Let no one think it was with another baptism, for there is no other except that of Christ, which came later; for to be sure, the baptism of Christ could not be then given by his disciples, in as much as the glory of the lord was not yet fully completed, nor the efficacy of the font established through the passion and resurrection; because our death cannot be annulled except by the Lord's passion, nor can our life be restored without his resurrection. Tertullian De Baptismo.

Those who are to enter upon Baptism must pray with repeated prayer, fasts and kneelings and vigils; and with confession of all their past sins. Tertullian De Baptismo c 198AD

For how can anything come into use, if it has not first been handed down? Even in pleading tradition, written authority, you say, must be demanded. Let us inquire, therefore, whether tradition, unless it be written, should not be admitted. Certainly we shall refuse to admit it, unless the example of other observances which, without any document of Scripture, we maintain on the ground of tradition alone, and on the support thereafter of custom, affords us a precedent. To deal with this matter briefly, I shall begin with Baptism. When we are going to enter the water, but a little before, in the presence of the congregation and under the hand of the president, we solemnly profess that we disown the devil, and his pomp, and his angels. Hereupon we are thrice immersed, making a somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord has appointed in the Gospel. Then, when we are taken up, we taste first of all a mixture of milk and honey, and from that day we refrain from the daily bath for a whole week. We take also, in meetings

before daybreak, and from the hand of none but the presidents, the sacrament of the Eucharist... Tertullian, On The Soldier's Crown. C198AD

Tertullian, on Baptism (Who may baptise?)

The high priest, who is the bishop, has of course the right to confer it; then the presbyters and deacons, not, however, without the bishop's authority, out of respect for the Church: when this respect is maintained, peace is secure. But besides, even laymen have the right to baptise; for that which is received alike by all, can be by all alike conferred; unless you argue that the name 'disciples' belongs only to bishops or presbyters or deacons. Baptism also, which is equally a divine instruction, can be practised by all.

On the meaning of John 3:5

"Unless a man has been born again of water and Spirit, he will not enter into the kingdom of the heavens." These words have tied faith to the necessity of baptism (Tertullian- on Baptism) c 198AD

Now the teaching is laid down that "Without baptism, salvation is attainable by no one." This is based primarily on the ground of that declaration of the Lord, who says, "Unless one is born of water he has not life." However, when this is laid down, there immediately arise scrupulous (or rather, audacious) doubts on the part of some (Tertullian c 198 AD)

On Infant baptism: Tertullian

... The Lord indeed says: Forbid them not to come unto me. Let them come, then, while they are growing up; let them come while they are learning, while they are being taught whither to come; let them become Christians, when they have been able to know Christ. Why hurries the age of innocence to the remission of sins?

The early church fathers did not need to write too much about the link between baptism and salvation because it was not questioned until Stephen bishop of Rome tried to convince the world that it was ok to accept heretics who had been baptised into a heretical group into the church without them having to be baptised. Much controversy over this ensued and much was written mainly by Cyprian about the relationship between baptism and salvation.

To see the link in the early church's mind about baptism and salvation, we have only to see Cyprian' defence of baptising repentant heretics. Towards the end of the first half of the third century.

Cyprian died in 258AD

But if any here object and say that Novatian holds the same rule that the Catholic Church holds, baptises with the same Creed wherewith we also baptise, acknowledges the same God the Father, the same Son Christ, the

same Holy Ghost, and therefore can claim the power of baptising because he seems not to differ from us in the baptismal interrogatory – whoso thinks that this may be objected, let him know in the first place that we and schismatics have not one rule of the Creed, nor the same interrogatories. For when they say ‘Dost thou believe remission of sins and eternal life by the holy Church? They lie in their interrogatory, since they have no Church. Then, moreover, they themselves confess with their own mouths that remission of sins can only be given by the holy Church; and not having this, they shew that sins cannot be remitted with them.

... I know not on what presumption some of our colleagues are led to think that such as have been dipped among the heretics ought not to be baptised when they come to us; because, they say, there is one baptism. This one baptism is without any doubt in the Catholic Church, because the Church is one, and baptism cannot be out of the Church. For seeing there cannot be two baptisms, if heretics truly baptise, then they have the baptism. And whoso by his own authority allows this privilege to them, yields and allows to them that the enemy and adversary of Christ seems to have the power of washing, purifying and sanctifying man. But we say that such as come thence are not re-baptised but baptised by us. For neither do they receive anything there, where there is nothing; but they come to us that here they may receive where is all grace and truth; for both grace and truth are one.

Decision of the Sixth Council of Carthage (Second on Baptism) 256AD.

You have written to me, dearest brother, desiring to know the bearings of my mind concerning the baptism of heretics, who being placed without, and established outside the Church, claim to themselves a matter over which they have neither right nor power. This we cannot account valid or lawful, since it is agreed that baptism among them is unlawful. And whereas we have already expressed in our letter what we decreed in Council when very many of us met together, I have sent you a copy of the same letters, to cut a long story short, and in addition what also I afterwards replied to Quintus, our colleague, inquiring of the same matter. And now, too, when we had met together, bishops of the provinces both of Africa and Numidia, to the number of seventy-one, we again confirmed this same by our sentence, ruling that there is one baptism, that appointed in the Catholic Church; and that accordingly whosoever come from the adulterous and profane water to be cleansed and sanctified by the truth of the saving water, are not re-baptised but baptised by us.

Again, Cyprian 255-6AD

But with us it is no new or sudden thing to decide that they are to be baptised, who come from heretics to the Church, in that now many years and a long period of time have elapsed since, under Agrippinus of honoured memory, very many bishops being convened, determined this:

thenceforward until this day, so many thousand heretics in our provinces have been converted to the Church who despised not or hesitated, nay with full consent of reason and will, have been glad to attain the grace of the life-giving laver and saving baptism.

In conclusion, we can see that baptism has its roots in the ceremonial washings of the Old Testament. These ceremonial washings point the way to how people enter into the new covenant relationship with God after the crucifixion of Jesus.

Though the New Testament, we see a definite Crystallisation of the beliefs of the apostles guided by the Holy Spirit that baptism is for both Jews and Greeks alike and that all need baptism to be saved.

As history unfolds after the apostolic age, we see a gentle shift from faith, expressing itself in baptism, to a belief in a system of sacraments that is supposed to bring salvation without the need for faith. It is this false belief that would ultimately inspire Augustine, Luther, and Calvin to a belief in Salvation by faith alone (although the seeds of this false doctrine were around in the time of James and provoked him to writing James 2:24). Let us not overreact like Augustine, Luther and Calvin but at the same time, let us not become so fixated on Baptism that we forget that baptism alone is no good without faith. Many people have sought false comfort from Romans 3 and Gal 4 and mistaken the written word of God in the New Testament for the Written Code (Given on Mount Sinai – the Old Covenant which is no longer in effect.) If we want to be saved by faith, we have to enter into the New Covenant relationship with God in order to claim its promises and we can only enter into the New Covenant relationship with God through repentance and baptism.

In Acts 2:38 Peter says:

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Some people emphasize Repentance, others emphasize Baptism, I would like to emphasize the word "AND". Repentance without baptism is equally as worthless as Baptism without repentance.

God bless.