

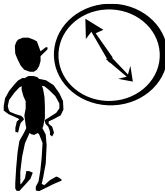
## THE BATTLE CREEK BULLETIN

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### Time of Assembly



#### Sunday:

Bible Study	9:00 a.m.
Worship	10:00 a.m.

#### Every other Sunday night:

Bible Study	4:00 p.m.
Worship	5:00 p.m.

#### Wednesday:

Bible Study	7:00 p. m.
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## Immersion, Pouring, and Sprinkling: A History

By Bruce Edwards, Jr.

This writer can remember witnessing at the age of five the “baptism” of his infant cousin; the denominational “pastor” sprinkled drops of water upon his forehead. I wondered at the significance of that action then, but now, with an increased understanding of the scriptural design of baptism, I not only wonder but must seriously question the validity of it. Jesus questioned the religious leaders and we must also examine with the same incisive interest modern-day concepts of baptism which conflict with the New Testament record. As any reputable scholar will attest, the only mode of baptism which was practiced in New Testament times was immersion. Immersion is, of course, the meaning of the Greek word transliterated “baptism” in our English translations. Not only was immersion the only mode of baptism, but it can also be abundantly established that the only design of baptism was “for the forgiveness of sins.”

### AN APPEAL TO HISTORY

An examination of historical documents which appear after the New Testament period is extremely helpful in understanding the development of certain practical and doctrinal trends characterizing the apostasy from the inspired message of the apostles. The writings of the men commonly called the “apostolic fathers” pinpoint for us the flow of thought which led to the many innovations that fill denominations today. These writings are searched and examined not for their authoritative value; the New Testament alone can be our standard for faith and practice, for it alone bears the divine sanction of inspiration. Rather we consult such documents for their historical insight into post-apostolic Christianity.

### SUBSTITUTIONS FOR IMMERSION

On an eventful day circa 253 A.D., a man named Novatian lay in illness, apparently upon his deathbed. Believing in the necessity of immersion for salvation, but unable to leave his

bed, he was permitted by a local “bishop” to substitute the pouring of water all about him in its place. This episode, reported by the famous church historian, Eusebius (*Church History* VI. xliii. 14, 17), constituted the first known historical substitution of another action in the place of immersion. Another author, Cyprian, writing close to the time of the Novatian incident, suggested that the substitution was appropriate in the case of “emergencies” clearly stating, however, that this was an “accommodation” and that “everything else must be in order” (*Epistle* 75:12). Since pouring was administered to those bed-fast with infirmities, the practice came to be known as “clinical baptism” after the Greek word for bed, *kline*. In reference to these exceptional substitutions and others which begin to appear infrequently following this period, we observe that to these writers, “baptism” still meant immersion and to describe another action (such as pouring or sprinkling) another word was used. Clearly, the origin of a substitute for immersion occurred in the context of extraordinary situations (either the lack of sufficient depth of water or the circumstances of the candidate for baptism).

That “real” baptism was still considered immersion before and during this period can be shown from the testimony of such writers as

- Tertullian: “Baptism itself is a bodily act, because we are immersed in water ...” (*On Baptism*, 7),
- Origen, who in commenting upon the crossing of the Red Sea mentions New Testament baptism: “the evil spirits seek to overtake you, but you descend into the water and you escape safely;” (*Homilies on Exodus*, V:5),
- Basil of Caesarea: “We imitate the burial of Christ through baptism. For the bodies of those being baptized are as it were buried in water” (*On the Holy Spirit*, XV:35), and
- Cyril of Jerusalem: “For as he who plunges into the waters and is baptized is surrounded on all sides by the waters, so were they also baptized completely ...” (*Catechetical Lectures*, XVII:14).

Though strongly opposed soon after its appearance, even as an “exceptional” measure, pouring and then sprinkling continued to gain more and more acceptance as adequate substitutes for immersion. It was inevitable that these alternative modes would ultimately become acceptable even in “normal” circumstances. The first “official” approval of such occurred in 753 A.D. when Pope Stephen declared the alternative modes acceptable in “cases of necessity.” It was not until 1311 A.D., by the council of Ravenna, that the practice of baptism by modes other than immersion was officially legislated as a matter of indifference in any circumstances of conversion. The words of Alexander Campbell are particularly pertinent here: “In the history of Christianity, the whole world, Eastern and Western Christendom, with the exception of a few sick and dying persons practiced immersion during the long space of thirteen hundred years. Since that time, license was granted first to the Pope, in 1311, to practice affusion (pouring) with the authority of the church. Calvin next gave a law to his branch of the church, authorizing affusion. This was carried first into Scotland,

and then into England ... and finally imposed upon the people, much against their own conviction and inclination at first. Time, however, reconciled them to it;" (*Christian Baptism*, p. 153).

## INFANT BAPTISM AND THE DESIGN OF IMMERSION

As we have suggested, the early church understood the design of baptism to be the "forgiveness of sins." This fact is underscored by the special emphasis placed upon the act in second-century literature. Among the blessings attributed to baptism by these writers were remission of sins, salvation, eternal life, regeneration, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Such a high view of the design of baptism could only have come from a first-century proclamation that intimately connected immersion and salvation. The consistency with which these men stress the essentiality of immersion would be impossible if not for this earlier understanding. It is inconceivable, as some would have us believe, that the whole realm of believers suddenly could have reversed its understanding of the design of baptism within fifty years after the lifetime of the apostles! It is evident that what made the change in mode justifiable in the minds of those who practiced pouring or sprinkling was the conviction that baptism was essential to salvation. The consideration of a substitute would never have occurred had baptism not been considered so important. This is a tremendously significant point that cannot be rationalized; this is corroborative proof that such passages as [Mark 16:16](#) and [Acts 2:38](#) are to be understood quite literally. Baptism is essential to salvation! There was a predominant conviction of the innocence of infants through the third century. In numerous passages, infants become the standard of purity and sinlessness. Indeed, the whole language of "rebirth" in connection with immersion presupposes the innocent state of the infant. This understanding plus the conviction that baptism was for the forgiveness of sins explains why there is no early reference in support of infant baptism in the post-apostolic literature. Baptism was for sinners, they understood, and babies are not sinners.

By the fourth century, however, baptism had ironically digressed into a "sacramental" act; divorced from its context within the whole of God's scheme of redemption, the act was given implications unwarranted in New Testament Scripture. Using [John 3:5](#) as a "proof-text," a view developed that baptism was necessary for every person who ever lived – without regard to age, spiritual state, or pre-New Covenant circumstance. Consequently, an absurd contention such as "Jesus was in Hades baptizing Old Testament saints" could find fertile soil. Naturally, then, the baptism of infants was rationalized as a precautionary measure to assure the safe passage of the infant to heaven should he die. The reasoning was, if no one could enter heaven without baptism, then everyone, whether sinner or not, must be baptized. It is thus seen that contrary to popular conception, the practice of infant baptism actually preceded the doctrine of "original sin." The first clear reference to infant baptism is found in Tertullian's writings and he opposed it, nevertheless showing that the practice did have its advocates at the time. Progressively, however, as the baptism of infants became more common, the practice became a decisive argument for the doctrine of original sin. Reversing the view of the prior century, men reasoned that if infants ought to

be baptized, then the reason must be because they are sinners since that is the design of baptism. An ironic turnabout indeed! Origen is the first to suggest in a positive defense that infants should be baptized; at his time of writing (mid-third century) the doctrine of original sin had not fully developed but was present in its early stages. Origen himself suggests that although infants themselves do not have “their own sins,” a stain attaches itself from previous human sin – a stain to be removed by baptism (*Homily on Luke, XIV:3*). This doctrine would be in full bloom by the middle of the fourth century with the assistance of Augustine.

## OBSERVATIONS

It is not difficult to trace the evolution of sprinkling and infant baptism to the present from these sources. As belief in the essentiality of baptism subsided and the presence of “original sin” on the souls of infants has been played down, most mainline Protestant groups have instituted the infant baptism ceremony as a “dedication service” for the parents. Of course, this practice has no more in common with the scriptures than did sprinkling, pouring, or the original practice of infant baptism. But as is the case with most innovations, a circumstance occurs which demands, in the minds of its advocates, a “bending” of scripture. This “bending” is justified on the basis of an “emergency;” however, once justified as an “exceptional” case, all too soon the innovation becomes established as an acceptable practice under any circumstances. We have seen this to be true in the case of the mode and design of baptism and currently witness the tragic consequences of such scripture wresting in other areas. The only possible remedy for the divided state of modern “Christendom” is a return to the authority of the scriptures. Doctrines and practices must not be formulated and then justified. The only possible procedure is to examine scripture first and allow it, as the voice of God, to determine what our practices and beliefs must be.

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## John Wesley’s View of Baptism

By Jeffrey W. Hamilton

John Wesley is most noted as the Methodists and several denominations, including the Church of the Nazarene, derive their beliefs from his writings. While no mere man’s writings establish the truth, it is interesting that his view of baptism was quite different from the denominations we find today.

“By baptism, we enter into a covenant with God, an everlasting covenant, are admitted into the church, made members of Christ, made children of God. By water as the means, the water of baptism, we are regenerated or born again.” [John Wesley, *A Preservative Against Unsettled Notions in Religion*, p. 146-150, as quoted in *Millennial Harbinger*, Volume 1 by William Kimbrough Pendleton and *Theological Writings on Various Subjects* by Peter Nead].

Now Wesley did advocate infant baptism by making the false conclusion that if Jews entered the covenant at eight days, then Christians could also enter a covenant in infancy. Wesley missed that the Christian covenant is also based on a person’s faith ([Mark 16:16](#)) and repentance from sins ([Acts 2:38](#)). However, it remains an interesting statement

because today many denominations declare that baptism is completely unnecessary. If it is practiced at all, it is said to be merely for a show -- "an outward sign of an inward grace."

That baptism makes us a part of a covenant is seen in [Colossians 2:11-13](#), "*In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses.*" Circumcision was the signed given to the Israelites to show that they were under a covenant with God. For Christians, this physical sign was replaced by baptism to signify that we too are under a covenant with God.

Baptism puts us into the kingdom of Christ as well. "*For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise*" ([Galatians 3:26-29](#)). Being in Christ, we also become children of God. "*Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him*" ([I John 3:1](#)).

That through the waters of baptism is taught by Paul. "*But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit*" ([Titus 3:4-5](#)). Jesus had declared this earlier when he told Nicodemus, "*Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*" ([John 3:5](#)).

It appears that John Wesley understood the importance and purpose of baptism better than many who wish to call themselves Christians; yet, who reject what Christ asked of them. How can they claim to love the Lord? "*If you love Me, keep My commandments*" ([John 14:15](#)). What he has asked of us is not hard. "*For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome*" ([I John 5:3](#)). And what did our Lord command of his people? "*All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*" ([Matthew 28:18-20](#)). Matthew followed that statement with a hearty "Amen!" (so be it!)

Do you love the Lord? While you submit to his rule and his commands? Then why follow the teachings of men? Do as the Lord commanded and enter into a covenant with him.

