



*A Defence
of the Place of Baptism
in the Early Church*

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The 12 points below form some of my fundamental beliefs on water baptism. The reader needs to realise that this is a “defence” document which means it is specifically concerned about addressing the issue of the neglect of water baptism. The main objective is to counter the view that baptism is merely an optional practice. I contend that the common “take it or leave it” approach as I have, mostly, dealt with here in these 12 points is a grave mistake and fails to take into account the serious tie between the Holy Spirit, repentance, faith, Gospel and salvation in which baptism is associated.

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1. I believe the baptismal “ceremony” may be compared, in principle, with a marriage ceremony.

Dualism has always plagued Christianity. Dualism maintains that the spiritual and physical elements of the world are *two separate and distinct entities that do not come together*. It would ask this question: “how can the physical act of baptism have any spiritual impact or benefit for the believer”? A “by faith only” approach to salvation is, therefore, *spiritual* and is distinct from any action on the part of the believer. Thus, it is argued, that *faith* should not be appended, *as a requirement*, by the *physical* act of baptism.

However, no one is dualistic with regard to the marriage ceremony. The question we could ask is this: “Is a de facto relationship right in the eyes of God”? Orthodox Christianity answers, no! Then, what is needed? We know that a marriage is needed! Yet, should not the same logic apply here with baptism? If a simple, physically conducted, marriage ceremony

is *required* for marriage why should it be beyond reason to affirm that a baptismal ceremony is *required*?

What we need to understand is that in marriage, the couple's status is changed *objectively* – a key word here. Every marriage celebrant knows this to be true as far as Australian law is concerned. But every Christian should know that an *objective* change of status is also true in the sight of God. It is interesting that very few Christians are raising serious objections to homosexuals living in a de facto relationship yet they are profoundly concerned about granting them the right to marry! The reason is that living in a de facto relationship doesn't *objectively* change the status of their relationship as marriage does.

Consider this scenario: A male and female Christian couple live together in a de facto relationship believing that love is all they need. They even convince themselves that they are "married" in God's sight. However, we all know that if that were true, there would be no such thing as fornication (premarital sex). The *physical*, formal, ceremony of marriage is what is needed to *objectively* change their status from "living in sin" to being in a "holy relationship". *Spiritually*, their status has changed. But what caused the change? The change came not from a change in their love – the *spiritual* aspect – but from a *physically conducted* ceremony before God and witnesses!

For consensual marriages, it would be absurd to suggest that a wedding ceremony has nothing to do with the couple's love. Should we not also consider it absurd that a person's baptismal ceremony has nothing to do with their faith!

Consider this thought: If God chooses only to acknowledge the couple's love after their wedding ceremony, why is it beyond reason to consider that He would only acknowledge a person's *faith* after one's baptismal ceremony?

There are abundant examples in the Old Testament where *physical action* was tied to *spiritual benefits* (e.g. Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac; the Israelites placing the blood on the doorposts and lintels of their homes; Naaman washing seven times in the Jordan before he was cleansed; Samson's hair was cut & the strength of God was gone. It grew back & he regained his strength). Therefore, I believe that the dualistic approach is an error & unsustainable in the light of New Testament teaching. *Physical* actions altered *spiritual* outcomes! The same is true with baptism.

2. I believe baptism is more than symbolic.

Baptism is often regarded as just a sign of something that has already happened in the life of a believer, yet no Scripture indicates that baptism is just a sign or a symbol of an inner reality (cf. Note baptism's lofty position here in Eph. 4:4-6. Look at baptism's close associates in these verses). See also Mark 16:16; Acts 19:3-5.

3. I believe baptism and faith go hand in hand.

In Gal. 3:26-27, baptism and faith are comfortably spoken of as fitting together in the "same glove". Far from separating them as done by many today, baptism and faith are here co-joined. When addressing believers regarding faith, who is Paul addressing: the baptised or unbaptised? It is clear that, in the early church, all believers were baptised (Gal. 3:27) so when Paul speaks of faith in his various epistles, he does not have in mind a "faith only" perspective, but *assumes* their baptism *as part* of such faith... (cf. Didache 9:5)

v.26 "you are all sons of God through *faith*..."

v.27 "for all of you who were *baptised*..."

4. I believe baptism is meant to form the dividing line between belief & unbelief.

In the early church the response to the call of Christ meant being willing to associate with Him. When a person was baptised into the *name* of the Lord Jesus Christ, they became His possession. The decision to be part of Christ's church (His body) was predicated on the response to repent/believe and be baptised into Christ (Acts 2:38, 41; 16:15; 16:33-34; 18:8). For the apostles, the physical act of baptism was made the dividing line between belief & unbelief. Baptism appears alongside of faith and in salvation contexts in the New Testament. See also ECC's constitution Art.3, sec 1..

5. I believe that baptism grants membership into the body of Christ (Gal. 3:27-29; Acts 2:41; cf. Matt. 28:19).

As difficult as it might be to accept, in the early church, a person not baptised would have been considered an unbeliever. People were admitted to the church/body of Christ upon their baptism. This occurred on the day of Pentecost and thereafter. The Ethiopian Eunuch, by Mosaic law (Deut. 23:1), could not be accepted as an equal in the congregation of Israel. However, he believed, was baptised and rejoiced in his new-found acceptance and full membership into Christ (Acts 8:39). Note that the Spirit did not take Phillip away until after he was baptised. His whole conversion experience was not complete until after he was baptised. See also Acts 10:47-48.

6. I believe repentance, faith & baptism brings about the work of God in salvation because it is tied to salvation promises made by Him.

The teaching of Scripture points to repentance, faith & baptism as the acceptance of God's promises into one's life. There is no suggestion in Scripture that any of the apostles understood such promises to be apart from baptism (Acts 2:38; 10:47-48; 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21), nor did they understand baptism to be someone's "works".

The Scriptures indicate that if baptism is a "work" it is a "work" of God, for only God can do the following which are directly associated with baptism: Forgive sins (Acts 2:38); Raise us to walk in a new life (Rom. 6:4); Raise us with Christ (Col. 2:12); Grant us a rebirth through a "washing" (Tit. 3:5).

7. I believe baptism is the acceptance of the death, burial & resurrection of Christ & indicates the reason to turn from sin (Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12).

Contrary to the suggestion that including baptism in the salvation experience nullifies the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, the Scriptures indicate that those who are baptised are united *with* Christ in His death, burial and resurrection (Rom. 6:5). As the texts above indicate, baptism brings a person into the new age through the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. The point of the Roman's passage is that as Christ died to this world and was raised to newness of resurrected life, the baptised person, who is now, "in Christ" (identified with Him through baptism) is naturally expected to die to this world (or age) of sin and be living in the newness of the resurrected life for this is what baptism indicates. The apostle clearly understands that in baptism a believer is brought intimately into fellowship with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ

8. I believe the call to be baptised into Christ was part of the Gospel message presented and how one accepted God's call (Acts 2:38, 16:33, cf. 22:16).

The Scriptures give multiple instances of a call to be baptised as an *integral* part of the Gospel message: Peter on the day of Pentecost, Phillip to the Samaritans, Peter to the household of Cornelius, Ananias to Saul, Paul to the Philippian jailer are just some examples (How could the pagan jailer know of baptism unless he was told?).

Even though the call to be baptised is not recorded in every scenario, the *template* of such a call is well established in the book of Acts. It is equally true that the call to repent is not recorded in every scenario in Acts either, but no one would suggest that it was not present nor implicit.

9. I believe that, in the 1st century, the *requirement* of baptism was assumed & did not need defending as it does today. The New Testament must be read, therefore, in that light.

When we read passages like Rom. 10:9 (confess with your mouth, believe in your heart and you will be saved) we must be careful not to dismiss the associated allusion to a baptismal confession of faith. It is important to note, however, that this was not apart from a believing heart. Faith must always be present for baptism to be effective. Nevertheless, it is out of place to suggest that this verse can be viewed apart from a baptismal context, especially since Paul has already alluded to the common baptism experience of all Christians in Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27 (see pt. 7 above).

10. I believe that baptism is a volitional response of repentance and/or faith & does, therefore, exclude infant baptism as a valid baptism.

There is no teaching on the baptism of infants. No instructions and no commands. If baptism is so important as Eph.4:5 suggests, then the apostles were either very sloppy or neglectful for there is no message for anyone to be baptised other than to those who could make a volitional response to the call of Christ. The arguments suggested for infant baptism rest on the conjecture that a "household" included infants. However, of all the Scriptures that mention "household", eight out of the nine occurrences describe volitional responses of the household in some way. The exception is Lydia's household. It is likely, however, that they were with her when

she was listening to Paul (Acts 16:13 & 15). See the appendix to this document.

Paedo or infant baptism does not solely rest on the household argument, however. It is supposed that there is a Covenantal arrangement that God has decreed along the lines of the Old Testament circumcision rite to males of 8 days old. However, the serious deficiency that seems evident in this position is that there are no Scriptures in the New Testament that give it support. Col. 2:11-12 mentions circumcision and baptism together, but Paul is using it in a strict metaphorical sense in a context of demonstrating the “fullness of the deity” in Christ against the shadowy precepts, traditions, festivals and laws of the Old Covenant (Col. 2:8-10, 13, 16-17, 22).

11. I believe I/we have no authority to speculate on the salvation of believing, but unbaptised people.

God alone will adjudicate on that matter. However, the church has no authority to neglect or undermine the *membership standard* of the biblical requirement of baptism (Eph. 4:5). The thief on the cross is prior to the call to be baptised into Jesus and cannot be used to nullify the requirement of baptism.

12. I believe that where a person was seeking baptism, but circumstances prevented it – i.e. road death, illness, martyrdom – that God would save such a person through their faith as an *exception* to the rule.

God is sovereign over salvation. He can bend the “rules” or change them at His discretion. Certain exceptions did take place in the book of Acts. Cornelius & his household (Acts 10) were listening to Peter and the Spirit fell upon them. Their *reception* of the Spirit, meant their *acceptance* from God. Yet, Peter, the Jew, then ordered that they be baptised – the order of occurrence is set out like this: “Forgiveness → Spirit →

Baptism". Note that Peter never neglected baptism in spite of God's forgiveness and the Spirit being granted to them first.

However, God had a purpose for reversing the order, from the norm, being: "Baptism → Forgiveness → Spirit" (Acts 2:38). The hard-hearted Jews had to be convinced that God would accept Gentiles and God shook their prejudice out of them by reversing the order. Think about it. Would a Jew be willing to baptise Gentiles (cf. Acts 11:2-3)? I doubt it! But what could Peter say after the Spirit of God fell upon the Gentiles? He would say what he said before the Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 11:15-18): "if God gave to them (Gentiles) the same gift as He gave to us (Jews) also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?". This is an important statement! Peter could not stand in God's way if God wished to accept the Gentiles. By reversing the order - in this specific case (Forgiveness → Spirit → Baptism) - God got His message through to an entrenched Jewish mindset who in response to Peter's testimony say, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18; cf. 15:7-11). Gentiles were then gladly accepted into the fold.

There are other cases in the book of Acts where God used *exceptions* to unify the church into *one* church/body. To ignore Luke's clear purpose, in writing the account of the expanding church into a Gentile world (Acts 1:8), is to misunderstand and, sadly, to abuse the role and importance of baptism. Now that the church is complete in the acceptance of Gentiles, no further exceptions are necessary. What this does reveal, however, is that God is not limited by His own promises to grant forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit to those who have repented and been baptised (Acts 2:38).

Appendix

<u>Text</u>	<u>Subject</u>	<u>Subjects</u>	<u>Responses</u>	<u>Purpose</u>
Acts 10:2	Cornelius	Household	Feared God	Serving God
Ac 10:2 —2 a devout man and one who <u>feared God with all his household</u> , and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually.				
Acts 11:14	Cornelius	Household	Responding to words	Salvation
Ac 11:14 —14 and he will <u>speak words</u> to you by which you will be saved, <u>you and all your household</u> .				
Acts 16:15	Lydia	Household	Baptised	Salvation
Ac 16:15 —15 And when she and her household had been baptised, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.				
Acts 16:31	Jailer	Household	Believe	Salvation
Ac 16:31 —31 They said, " <u>Believe</u> in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, <u>you and your household</u> ."				
Acts 16:32	Jailer	Household	Hear the word	Salvation
Ac 16:32 —32 And they <u>spoke</u> the word of the Lord <u>to him together with all who were in his house</u> .				
Acts 16:33	Jailer	Household	Baptised	Salvation
Ac 16:33 —33 And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was <u>baptised</u> , he and all his household.				
Acts 16:34	Jailer	Household	Rejoiced / Believed	Salvation
Ac 16:34 —34 And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and <u>rejoiced</u> greatly, having <u>believed</u> in God <u>with his whole household</u> .				
Acts 18:8	Crispus (Jew)	Household (Jewish) Corinthians (Gentiles)	Believing & being baptised	Salvation
Ac 18:8 —8 Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, <u>believed</u> in the Lord <u>with all his household</u> , and many of the <u>Corinthians</u> when they heard were <u>believing</u> and being <u>baptised</u> .				
1 Cor. 16:15	Stephanas	Household	Ministry to Saints	Serving God
1 Cor. 16:15 —15 Now I urge you, brethren (you know the <u>household</u> of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have <u>devoted themselves for ministry to the saints</u>)... cf. 1 Cor. 1:16.				