

Baptism in the Church of the Nazarene

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Some in the Church of the Nazarene are confused about the meaning of baptism. In our cross-cultural ministries in Asia-Pacific, we have encountered this confusion acutely in the last two years with the document, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism*. In this publication, which bears the official approval of the denomination, Question 91 reads, “Who can receive the sacrament of baptism? Infants and young children may be baptized as a symbol of God’s acceptance within the community of Christian faith on the basis of prevenient grace (Manual ¶800.2). All persons not yet baptized who have put their faith in Christ as Savior *may also* receive the sacrament of baptism” (emphasis added).¹ This statement can be interpreted to mean that baptism is primarily meant for infants and young children, and the baptism of new believers is an afterthought or an addition. The confusion we have experienced in our ministries comes not only from this document but when people read the *Manual* or other Nazarene publications and then read their Bibles and conclude that our doctrine contradicts the clear teaching of the Bible about the nature of baptism.

Article XII has proven to be confusing because it seems to say two different things about baptism. The first part states that baptism is a response of faith:

We believe that Christian baptism, commanded by our Lord, is a sacrament signifying acceptance of the benefits of the atonement and incorporation into the Body of Christ. Baptism is a means of grace proclaiming faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. It is to be administered to believers indicating their full purpose of obedience in holiness and righteousness.

The second part shows that the faith of others is the basis for baptism:

¹ “One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism: Essential Teachings for Faith Formation in the Church of the Nazarene,” *Holiness Today* (July/August 2017): Vol. 19, no. 4, 91.

As participants in the new covenant, young children and the morally innocent may be baptized upon request of parents or guardians. The church shall give assurance of Christian training.

The last sentence is about the mode of baptism and does not specifically address faith:

Baptism may be administered by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion.²

The first part states that baptism is for believers. The second part lacks any reference to the faith of the one baptized. It is our thesis that the first half can be clearly supported from Scripture. The second half is based on church tradition and theological reasoning and has no clear support in Scripture. Thus, the two parts of this Article give contradictory conclusions.

Paragraph 702 in the *Manual*, the ritual on Infant Baptism, adds further confusion:

While we do not hold that baptism imparts the regenerating grace of God, we do believe that Christian baptism signifies for this young child God's acceptance within the community of Christian faith on the basis of prevenient grace. It anticipates his (her) personal confession of faith in Jesus Christ. In presenting this child for baptism you are hereby witnessing to your own personal Christian faith and to your purpose to guide him (her) early in life to a knowledge of Christ as Savior.³

This statement raises several questions:

1. On the basis of whose faith can a person be baptized?
2. How can faith be anticipated?
3. What is the biblical support for a person becoming part of the church without faith?

There are two different ways to approach this topic. One is using a deductive method.

This approach uses the Bible to support a thesis offered by tradition. It is our opinion that the primary supports for the practice of infant baptism are tradition and theological reasoning, and that the Bible is selectively used as a proof text for these. A second method is inductive. It begins with the Bible as the primary source for doctrine. The goal is to determine clearly what the Bible teaches and from this, arrive at a statement of faith. We suggest that the better approach

² *Manual*, 2017-21, Church of the Nazarene (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2017), 33-34.

³ *Manual*, 266.

hermeneutically is the inductive. We should not start with the practice of tradition and work back to Scripture but start with Scripture to show what we should believe and how we should act.

In the remainder of this paper, we would like to show that the statement of faith about baptism and in particular, infant baptism, needs revised, and this revision should be based clearly on biblical teaching.

I. Baptism in the New Testament

The Gospels say little about baptism except at the beginning and end of Jesus' ministry. The first mention of baptism in the New Testament is marked by repentance from sins (Matt 3:6). This theme continues in other verses that mention baptism (Mark 1:4; Acts 2:38). John the Baptist spoke of a different type of baptism that would be done by Jesus through the Holy Spirit (Matt 3:13). This baptism would not be done by water for cleansing of the outside but by fire that would purify the inside. Water baptism prepares for Spirit baptism (Acts 1:5; 2:38). Jesus then identified with sinful humanity by being baptized in the Jordan River (Matt 3:16). By becoming one with humanity even at the point of identifying with our humanness, Jesus fulfilled the Father's plan to bring about the righteousness of those who believe. Jesus had total faith in the Father (John 5:19, 30; 8:28) signified by the voice from heaven, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17). Jesus' baptism becomes the model for all other baptisms in the New Testament. It demonstrates the total reliance Jesus had upon his Heavenly Father. If we are to follow Jesus' pattern, which should be our utmost goal, we should note that he was dedicated as an infant (Luke 2:22-23) and baptized later as a sign of his commitment to the Father confirmed through the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus commands his disciples to make more disciples. One of the ways to do this is *by baptizing* them (instrumental adverbial participle). Baptism is an essential

part of discipleship. Discipleship requires the conscious decision of faith to follow Jesus. Baptism is the demonstration that one has willingly taken up his or her cross (Mark 8:34, 38). This concept is repeated in Mark 10:37-39 as the disciples want to sit at Jesus' right and left. Jesus' response indicates that their total commitment will be required by being baptized into a death like his. Infants are not developmentally capable of this decision of faith. Young children, however, may be capable of choosing to believe in Jesus when they become self-aware and understand the nature of right and wrong, what is often called the "age of accountability." These verses clearly teach that baptism is a sign of faith in Jesus. Obedience is a demonstration of faith. The biblical way to confess faith and obedience in Christ is baptism.

Everyone who believes and becomes a follower of Jesus should be baptized. Baptism is always accompanied with the faith of the one being baptized. *Never once* is there an example of baptism preceding faith as the norm to be followed. The order of events when Peter preached his Pentecost sermon is noteworthy. Peter called for the people to repent of their sins. They accepted his message, which assumes their faith in Jesus' death and resurrection, and then they were baptized: "repent and be baptized . . . and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 4:38). The order of faith followed by baptism is repeated in Philip's ministry in Samaria in Acts 8:12: "when they believed . . . they were baptized." Later, as Philip journeyed with the Ethiopian Eunuch, the implication in Acts 8:36 is that the Eunuch believed in the gospel as revealed through Isaiah 53 and so wanted to be baptized. In Acts 9:17-19, upon his new-found faith in Christ on the road to Damascus, Saul was filled by the Spirit and baptized by Ananias. There is much implied and unstated in this text, but it is clear that Saul was baptized because of his new faith in Christ (see also Acts 22:16). Sometimes baptism is the response for those who have accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ and received the Holy Spirit by faith but have not made the

formal confession publicly. This is evidently what happened to Cornelius and his household in Acts 10:44-48. Baptism is not a requirement for salvation or the filling of the Spirit, which are both through faith, but it is the outward confession of these. Lydia responded to Paul's preaching and was subsequently baptized (Acts 16:14-15). Later also in Philippi (Acts 16:30-34), the jailor and his whole household believed and then were baptized. If there were any children present, they also must have believed before being baptized, as indicated in this phrase: "he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household" (v. 34 NIV). The pattern of faith and baptism is repeated again with Crispus, the synagogue ruler of Corinth (Acts 18:8). In Ephesus, Paul found twelve believers who had not yet been baptized in the name of Jesus or received the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:4-6). The connection of their faith to Jesus is crucial to their baptism in this passage. The conclusion is clear that in the earliest church as recorded by Luke, *the faith of the new believer is the requirement for baptism, and that baptism prepares for the person to be filled by the Holy Spirit.*

Other passages in the New Testament confirm the experiences recorded in Acts and help develop the theology of baptism. Romans 6:3-4 shows that baptism is the way believers identify with Christ's death and resurrection. This significant passage shows that water baptism is the physical act demonstrating freedom from the control of sin and filling of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:1-13). Going into the water symbolizes death to the old way of life. Rising from the water symbolizes new life in Christ free from the power and control of sin. Baptism does not guarantee holy living but is a vivid, outward testimony of the inner commitment to make Jesus Lord and Master of one's life. The Corinthians may have been baptized but were not living like it (1 Cor 3:1-3; 10:1-2). They needed to live out their baptism by allowing the Holy Spirit to fill and guide them into maturity in Christlikeness (2:6-16). The pattern through the Bible is that faith must be

confirmed through obedience. Baptism demonstrates our willingness to live by faith in Christ and in obedience to him (Gal 3:27).

The Apostle Paul makes further connection between baptism and sanctification in Colossians 2:11-12. He refers here to “the circumcision of Christ” which happens in the heart through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit (Rom 2:29). Baptism is the symbol of the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit. Circumcision of the heart by the Holy Spirit by which we are transformed into the likeness of Christ (2 Cor 3:18) is represented by the cleansing effect of water through baptism. Faith again is the key thought in relation to baptism (v. 12). In 1 Peter 3:20-21, Peter connects baptism to having a clear conscience. To have a clear conscience requires following in the footsteps of Jesus, who through death was made alive in the Spirit (v. 18). It also requires relying on the power of his resurrection to cleanse us from sin. The key requirement is revering Christ as Lord (v. 15). “Baptism now saves you” because of the faith it represents and not as a physical act in itself. Paul makes this clear in Titus 3:5 by stating that God saves us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. If this “washing” is a reference to baptism, we see again the pattern of baptism leading to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, at the moment we believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we become part of the church, the body of Christ. Baptism is the outward symbol of this statement of faith (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 4:5). Baptism in Christ opens the way for all people to be part of Christ’s body (Gal 3:28). *The faith of the saved person in Christ is the sole requirement for membership in Christ’s body.* There is no exception to this anywhere in the New Testament.

II. Baptism in the Early Church

We have seen from Scripture that baptism was always preceded by repentance from sin and confession of faith in Jesus Christ. How then did infant baptism become an established practice in the Christian church when it is not based on the candidates' repentance or confession of faith? John Wesley writes that “. . . infant baptism has been the general practice of the Christian Church in all places and in all ages, that it has continued without interruption in the Church of God for above seventeen hundred years, we may safely conclude, it was handed down from the Apostles, who best knew the mind of Christ.”⁴ But is Wesley correct?

Everett Ferguson, from Abilene Christian College, has spent a lifetime studying baptism practices in the early church. In 2009 he published the results of his research in his masterly 953 page book, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*. Ferguson's book is very thorough and yet readable. It is extremely well set out and has meticulous footnotes and 90 pages of indexes. We can safely say that no one has ever studied baptism in the first five centuries as deeply or as thoroughly as Ferguson has. Not only does he look at the literary sources, but he has also studied the architecture of churches and especially baptisteries to see how they have changed in size and shape throughout the centuries. This means that we now have very detailed information of the first five centuries before us that Wesley did not have. What are Ferguson's conclusions?

A. Summary of Baptism in Acts

Ferguson summarizes baptism in Acts and reaches similar conclusions as noted above:

The accounts of conversion in Acts ordinarily include mention of baptism. . . . Where any details are given an immersion is either implied or is consistent with what is said. The baptism was done in the name of Jesus Christ, a characteristic that may include a confession of faith in him. The baptism is always preceded by a preaching of the gospel.

⁴ John Wesley, “Treatise on Baptism,” *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1978), Vol. 10, 198.

The message called for faith in Jesus and repentance of sins. All the accounts of conversion involve persons of responsible age, with no certain indication of infants or children being included. . . . Baptism is viewed both as a human act and an act in which God was at work.⁵

B. Baptism in the Second Century

Justin Martyr was martyred about 165. His *Apology*, written about 150, contains an account of Christian baptism, and he can be taken as a good representative for the mid-second century. The major difference between second century practices and the book of Acts is that instead of baptism following immediately upon a person coming to faith in Christ as happened in the book of Acts, baptism was now the culmination of a discipleship process.

Ferguson concludes:

A period of instruction, prayer and fasting preceded the baptism. It required faith, repentance and a commitment to a life according to the teachings of Jesus. Baptism is administered in the triune name. It brought one into the fellowship of the Christian community, expressed in the sharing in common prayer and the eucharist. Baptism meant especially forgiveness of sins, a regeneration, and an enlightenment. Other themes involved a deliverance from a former manner of life dominated by demonic influences and a sharing in the gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁶

C. Cyril and the Jerusalem Church

The influential church in Jerusalem provides fairly detailed evidence for baptismal practice in the writings of Cyril, who was bishop in Jerusalem in the mid fourth century.

Ferguson summarizes Cyril's writings as follows.

The period of Lent was given over to preparing the new believers for baptism. Lent was a time of prayer and fasting, listening to sermons and instruction in preparation for baptism which

⁵ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries: History, Theology and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2009), 184-185.

⁶ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 244.

was typically held on Easter Sunday. The baptism ceremony itself was rich with symbolism which tied together all the instruction the candidates had received in previous weeks.

Baptisteries were built generally on the west side of the church and symbolized a journey from darkness to light and from death to life. Each candidate would face the west, representing darkness, and renounce the devil and all of his works. Then he or she would turn to the east and answer a series of questions, declaring, “I believe in the Father, in the Son, and in the Holy Spirit and in the baptism of repentance.” The renunciation of Satan followed immediately by the declaration of belief demonstrating the two essential prerequisites for baptism—repentance and faith.⁷

Then the candidate would disrobe and enter the baptism pool naked. The nakedness represented the nakedness of a baby and so new birth. It also represented putting off the old person (Col 3:9) in imitation of the nakedness of Christ on the cross (Col 2:15) and a restoration of the likeness of Adam in paradise who was naked but not ashamed. The naked person was then anointed with the oil of exorcism which combined the idea of healing as well as removal of all invisible powers of the evil one.

Many baptisteries had three steps going down into the water, which helped to symbolize the three days Jesus was in the tomb. People entered from the west and exited to the east, symbolizing the Israelites passing through the Red Sea, which was a journey from slavery to freedom and new life as the people of God. Just as Pharaoh and his armies were drowned in the sea, so the baptized person is set free from demonic powers and is no longer under the devil’s power. The water was also a symbol of washing and the forgiveness and cleansing from sin that takes place in Baptism. The person would then be baptized three times, once each in the name of

⁷ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 477.

the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The three immersions also represented for Cyril the three days that Jesus was in the tomb. Immersion in the water was a symbol of death and resurrection. Upon exiting the water, representing resurrection from the grave, the newly baptized person would be clothed in a white robe representing putting on Christ and the robe of righteousness (Gal 3:27 and Col 3:9-10). They would be anointed with oil representing the seal of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The new Christians entered the church, symbolizing their reception into the body of Christ, and joined with the other believers in the eucharist.

We can see that this whole process was a powerful discipleship experience where the new believer identified himself or herself with the whole of the story of God, especially aspects of the creation, fall, exodus, and particularly Jesus' death and resurrection. Ferguson concludes, "From this whole account it is evident that no infant baptism was in view."⁸

This then raises the big question, *With such a strong emphasis on believer's baptism in the early church, how and why did infant baptism develop?*

D. The Historical Development of Infant Baptism

Ferguson has a whole chapter on the origin and early development of infant baptism.⁹ He looks at the writings of Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, and the Apostolic tradition. He also looks at burial inscriptions that have survived from the end of the first and the beginning of the second century and references to baptism that are included in the inscriptions. All accounts of infant baptism before the fourth century, for which we have names, were for infants who were gravely ill. Ferguson concludes:

John 3:5 had left a strong impression on the second century church as requiring the necessity of baptism for entrance into heaven. When a child of Christian parents became seriously ill there was the natural human concern about the welfare of the child's soul and

⁸ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 481.

⁹ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, ch. 23, 362-379.

a desire to make every preparation for the afterlife. Request from the parents or family members for the baptism of a gravely ill child would have been hard to refuse. The (burial) inscriptions are the key to understanding the origin of infant baptism. When we recall the high infant mortality rate of the ancient world it is easy to understand how an emergency practice became a normal practice. The early acquiescence in the emergency baptism of infants would account for the lack of controversy in the early church over the acceptable age for baptism.¹⁰

1. Tertullian (155-240)

Tertullian provides the first certain literary reference to infant baptism. This indicates that infant baptism had started to occur by late second century. However, Tertullian was opposed to infant baptism. His main argument was that since baptism is related to forgiveness of sins and since new born infants have not committed any sin, then baptism was unnecessary. Tertullian taught that baptism was for those who had made a clear personal decision of faith in Christ and this made the baptism of small children appear irresponsible; someone who could not repent must be dissuaded from baptism.”¹¹

2. Origen (184-253)

Origen reaffirmed the usual Christian understanding of baptism as being for the forgiveness of sins. This understanding presented a problem for the baptizing of infants. Origen tried to provide theological justification for infant baptism by connecting baptism to removing the “stain” of birth. Ferguson writes, “Origen quoted Job 14:4-5 ‘No one is clean of stain, not even if his life on earth had lasted but a single day.’ Through the mystery of baptism, the stains of birth are put aside. For this reason, even small children are baptized. For ‘unless born of water and the spirit one cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.’”¹² He adds, “Origen’s innovation is to

¹⁰ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 378-379.

¹¹ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 365.

¹² Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 367.

extend the baptismal forgiveness of sins to ceremonial impurity particularly that associated with childbirth. It remained for a later age to extend the concept to inherited sin.”¹³ Origen’s statements indicate that the practice of infant baptism came first and theological justification for it came later.

3. Augustine (354-430)

Augustine had a very strong emphasis on baptism. He emphasized that Acts 2:38 meant the forgiveness of *all* sins. He taught that baptism is the means of entering into the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. He wrote, “You believed, you were baptized, your old life died, slain on the cross, buried in baptism.”¹⁴ Augustine argued that Christ, not the purity of the minister, made baptism effective. Hence, Catholics did not re-baptize converts from a heresy or a schism who had already been baptized in the Trinitarian name.

This strong emphasis on the effectiveness of baptism regardless of the character of the person administering the sacrament influenced his understanding of infant baptism. Augustine’s coupling of infant baptism and original sin was the foundation for his reconstruction of baptismal doctrine and practice that was to dominate the western church for subsequent centuries.¹⁵

Augustine did not so much argue that children needed to be baptized because they had original sin, but that the fact that we baptize children proved that they have original sin. His argument was that Christians practice infant baptism. The purpose of baptism is to take away sin, but since little children are innocent, then the only sin that can be removed is the guilt of original sin. Pelagius argued that the children of believers would not have original sin because their parents were living Christian lives. Augustine argued that both groups practiced infant baptism,

¹³ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 369.

¹⁴ Augustine, Sermon 229 E.3, in Edmund Hill, *The Works of St Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (New Rochelle: New City Press 1993), 282.

¹⁵ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 804.

and baptism is for the removal of sin. Therefore, if it is not the child's sin, then the sin that is removed at baptism must be the guilt of Adam's sin. The practice of infant baptism proves that children have original sin and that is why we baptize them. This is rather circular reasoning.

4. Baptisteries

Sebastion Ristow compiled a list of more than 1000 baptisteries and fonts dating from the third century to the ninth century. Ferguson reviews this work and says, "The predominant number of baptismal fonts permitted immersion and many were so large as to defy any reason for their existence other than for immersion."¹⁶ The depth of baptisteries in the fourth and fifth centuries was customarily one meter deep. Baptisteries became smaller from the fifth century onwards as infant baptisms became increasingly common.

5. Circumcision and Baptism

Infant baptism was never presented as a New Testament substitute for circumcision in the early church. When any connection between circumcision and baptism was made, it was always in relation to the circumcision of the heart in believer's baptism. Infant baptism was initially an exception to the rule and done when it seemed that death was imminent.

E. Summary

1. The early church had a very strong doctrine of believer's baptism. This was for people of responsible age and was only entered into after prayer, fasting, careful instruction, and indoctrination.
2. The early liturgies for baptism included questions about renouncing the devil and confessions of faith, which showed that they were clearly designed for people of responsible age.
3. The size of baptisteries was almost a meter deep, indicating that baptisms were done by immersion.
4. The theology of baptism applied to those of responsible age.

¹⁶ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 849.

5. There is no literary reference to infant baptism until Tertullian in the second century, who argues against it.
6. Emergency baptism of children had begun at the latest by 200, and after Tertullian we do not hear of opposition to infant baptism. However, if children were healthy, there is no evidence that their parents presented them for baptism.
7. It was only at the end of the fourth century that there were indications of minor but telling accommodations so that sponsors or god-parents could speak on behalf of infants.
8. It was only in the fifth century with Augustine's developed doctrine of infant participation in the guilt of Adam's sin did a theological justification of infant baptism gain favor, and then only in the West.
9. The lack of an agreed theology of infant baptism between the Greek (e.g. Chrysostom) and Latin (e.g. Augustine) churches at a time when the practice came under discussion (late fourth and early fifth century) argues strongly against infant baptism having been a standard or common practice for the preceding centuries.¹⁷

III. Sociological considerations

The evidence suggests that infant baptism most likely began because of the belief that baptism was required for admission into heaven based on a certain interpretation of John 3:5 and the high infant mortality rate in the times of the early church. It is clear that over time, infant baptism began to spread widely even though there was neither scriptural basis nor a clear theological basis for it. There could well be sociological reasons behind its acceptance. All societies have rituals that mark important transitions in the life of individuals and communities.

Many people see infant baptism as a rite of passage. Birth rites are public rituals that signify the admission of new members into the society. Birth rites transform infants into human beings, give them a social identity, and also help the mother to reintegrate back into society after the birth of the child.¹⁸ In Judaism there was circumcision for the male child after eight days at

¹⁷ Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 632.

¹⁸ Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books 1999), 308.

which time he was also given a name and made a member of society. There were also rites of purification for the mother after 40 days. People in other cultures also have various rites to incorporate children into society and protect them during the first few years of life when life is precarious. These rites have religious connotations because people are looking for divine assistance and blessing. In the pagan religions that existed at the time of the early church, shamans and various other traditional practitioners of the magical arts would have been involved in infant naming, supplying charms and amulets to keep away the “evil eye” and evil spirits. Christian families, just like the mothers who brought their children to Jesus, no doubt felt the need of some sort of spiritual protection for their little ones especially as infant mortality rates were high. Acts 15 had done away with the importance of infant circumcision, but how were the Christians going to show that their infant was now under God’s protection and blessing? It is not hard to see how infant baptism could be seen as a ritual that could fill that gap in people’s lives. If infant baptism was acceptable for a child who was gravely ill, then why not extend it to those who were healthy and hopefully they would not become ill?

Ferguson mentions that as an alternative to infant baptism, some people vowed their infants to the service of God and or enrolled them as catechumens. In this way, the infants were associated with the church and under God’s blessing but not baptized until they reached the age of responsibility. This compares to the practice of dedication of infants.¹⁹ It is noteworthy that when the mothers brought the children to Jesus (Matt 19:13-15), he did not instruct the disciples to baptize them but took them in his arms and blessed them. It could be argued that Jesus modelled infant dedication not infant baptism.

¹⁹ David F Wright, “Infant Dedication in the Early Church,” in Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross, eds., *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 352-378.

IV. Re-Baptism

Re-baptism was discussed quite often in the early church, but it was always in relation to believer's baptism. The issue was not so much the faith of the candidate but the status of the baptizer. There were some schisms in the early church and the debate was about if people who had been baptized in a breakaway group should be re-baptized if or when they returned to the Catholic church. The conclusion was that they did not need to be re-baptized.

In many parts of the world, questions have come up when people who were baptized as infants later come to faith in Christ and want to be baptized. In some places in Papua New Guinea, mainline churches came in and baptized large numbers of people in a village with very little instruction. Later in life these people came to real faith in Christ through the ministry of the Church of the Nazarene or some other evangelical church. The new converts felt that the baptism in which they had participated was empty and without significance because they had no understanding of what it was about. There was no repentance, no faith, and no meaning. They identified themselves with the people in Ephesus (Acts 18:8) who had gone through a baptism ritual but with no faith in Christ. Now that they had come to faith in Christ, they wanted to express this faith publicly by being baptized and demonstrating that they had died to sin and were alive in Christ.

The Personal Experience of Neville Bartle

I was brought up in a strong Methodist family and was christened in the Methodist church when I was a few weeks old. I was brought up in a strong Christian family and gave my heart to the Lord in an evangelistic rally when I was eight years old. In my early twenties, I was appointed to Papua New Guinea as a medical missionary with the Church of the Nazarene. My wife, Joyce, and I started our first church a few months later. One Sunday we witnessed a group

of hospital employees being baptized in the river close to the hospital. While watching the baptism, I heard the Lord very clearly say, “Soon you will be baptizing others but first you need to get baptized yourself.” I immediately removed my shoes and watch and went and joined the others waiting to be baptized. It was a simple act of obedience to God. I discovered later that my wife Joyce who had been baptized in the Church of Scotland as an infant had also received believer’s baptism in the Church of the Nazarene when she was in her twenties.

I thought we were the exception to the rule, but in asking around, I have asked forty people who are presently strongly active in their churches about their experience concerning infant baptism. Twenty-eight were baptized as infants, ten were dedicated as infants, and two were neither dedicated nor baptized as children. Not surprisingly the ten who were dedicated were later baptized as believers in either their teens or early twenties. Of the twenty-eight who were baptized as infants, twenty-five of them were baptized as believers later in life. This works out at about 90%.

This group includes people from the UK, Canada, USA, India, Samoa, and New Zealand. Many of them are in the Church of the Nazarene but others attend other churches. All of them testify that it was an inner conviction from God that caused them to feel that their infant baptism, which had been significant to their parents, was not significant for them. They felt the need to personally identify publicly with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and so demonstrate their faith and trust in him. Admittedly, forty people is a small number. But when 90% of respondents feel that God was telling them that infant baptism, while significant for their parents, was not sufficient for them, this indicates that God does not see them as equivalent. There were three people who were baptized as infants and did not later get baptized as a believer. One did not get baptized because of physical mobility problems. One indicated that he was seriously

thinking about getting baptized. The other one had been baptized as an infant in the Catholic church and had then gone through a very thorough confirmation process. He said that the confirmation process was very significant, and he felt no need to be re-baptized. However, three of his brothers who went through the same process have also undergone believer's baptism.

In summary, many people who were baptized as infants feel a deep compulsion in their late teens or early twenties or even later in life to be as they would describe it, "properly baptized." They feel that in infant baptism, they neither repented nor believed but were simply passive participants and understood nothing of what was happening. They have no memory of the occasion and it had no spiritual significance to them. They identify very much with the people in Acts 18 who had undergone baptism without any real faith in Christ and were re-baptized by Paul. They believe that it is God himself who laid this burden upon their hearts to be baptized and it becomes a very significant part of their spiritual journey of discipleship. Since Wesleyans believe that experience is significant in developing theology, then this experience of believers feeling that their infant baptism was insignificant and the need to be baptized as part of discipleship needs to be considered in any theology of baptism,

V. Further Arguments Given for Infant Baptism

Different arguments have been offered over the centuries in support of infant baptism. Many of these have long tradition in the church. Many of them were accepted and argued by John Wesley and more recently by Nazarene theologian Rob Staples.²⁰ The following section will look at these arguments and offer a different perspective about each.

²⁰ Wesley, "Treatise on Baptism," 188-201. Rob Staples, *Outward Sign, Inward Grace: The Place of Sacraments in Wesleyan Spirituality* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1991).

A. Infant Baptism in the New Testament

First, it is often argued that the New Testament shows that infants were baptized as part of household baptisms (Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Cor. 1:16). The argument is that surely these households included infants. However, the hermeneutical methodology of this argument must be questioned. It begins with an assumption that lacks clear exegetical support. Acts 16:32 makes clear that Paul spoke the word of the Lord not just to the jailor but “to all who were in his house.” Verse 34 shows that the jailor and the whole house believed. Although the grammar indicates that the jailor is the focus of the story, no one in the house was saved by the jailor’s faith alone. Each individual believed and was part of this celebration.

Appeal is also made to when Jesus welcomed children in Matthew 19:14. The point Jesus is making in this passage is that children should have direct access to him. He is not offering a timeless truth about baptism. Welcoming and blessing little children as part of God’s kingdom is not the same as baptizing infants. There is no linguistic or theological connection in this passage between blessing children and baptizing them. Jesus bestowed a special blessing upon the children by touching them with his hands. Disciples (the church) must welcome children and provide a way by which they can come to faith in Jesus.

Even Rob Staples recognizes that the infant baptism lacks direct support in the New Testament. He argues that since the Bible is not clear on this issue, it must be solved by theology. He appeals to a Wesleyan hermeneutic that Scripture must be interpreted by tradition, reason, and experience. The Bible is to be read Christologically. “Such a concept of religious authority gives Wesleyanism a robust confidence that transcends any anxiety that might be created by the lack of absolute proof-texts on questions such as that of infant baptism, which

apparently cannot be settled by biblical exegesis alone.”²¹ We argue that this is a weak and unnecessary position to assume in light of the clear teaching of the Bible on this matter.

The question to ask about this position is whether or not the Church of the Nazarene will determine its Articles of Faith from the Bible or use some other source, even if it is theological reasoning or church tradition and practice. The authors of this paper argue that we must build our core faith statements on the received revelation of God in the Bible (Article IV).

B. Infant Baptism Replacing Circumcision

Second, it is argued that infant baptism replaces circumcision as the initiatory sign of the new covenant. Since male infants were circumcised in the old covenant, it is believed that all infants of Christians should be baptized as part of the new covenant. Although there are logical connections between circumcision and baptism as both being initiatory, there is no explicit connection in the New Testament or in the history of the early church of the baptism of infants replacing circumcision of male infants. There are other theological grounds for Christian infant boys not being circumcised than connecting it to infant baptism. Circumcision was the sign of God’s covenant with Israel. In the new Israel, the Church, circumcision is replaced by faith as the condition for adoption into God’s family (Gal 3:26-29).

The link of baptism to circumcision is symbolic in the New Testament. Baptism as a testimony of faith in Christ represents a spiritual circumcision that cuts out the old life of sin. Physical circumcision is no longer needed to join the covenant people of God (Galatians 5:6; 6:15). However, a spiritual circumcision is needed whereby God removes sin from a person’s heart. Even in the Old Testament, physical circumcision was not enough to make a person to be in favor with God. Moses called for a deeper work in the heart in Deuteronomy 10:16:

²¹ Staples, *Outward Sign*, 174.

“Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.” God wanted something deeper and transforming for the people of Israel. Ezekiel 36:25-29 shows that the Holy Spirit will do this through the new covenant:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleanness.

Circumcision of the heart will become evident in a change of behavior and rejection of sin. The image of circumcision is a symbolic way of saying that sin must be cut off and removed from our lives. Physical baptism is the testimony that we have acted in faith and consecration, relying on God’s grace in Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit to make this possible. Thus, baptism is a commitment to experience the sanctifying and transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

It is argued that baptism replaces circumcision as the sign of covenant. However, Jesus said that the sign of the new covenant is the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:25). The new covenant was ratified through the blood of Christ (Heb 9:15) and is to be remembered “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup” (1 Cor 11:26). Baptism is initiatory as the outward act that represents entrance into the new life in Christ. It is a one-time act because people should commit themselves and not return to a life of sin. However, the New Testament does not explicitly say that baptism can be done only once, that it cannot be repeated, or “once baptized always in the state of salvation.” Those who walk away from God invalidate their baptism because it represents their testimony of salvation in Christ. As the sign of repentance, sanctification, and discipleship, baptism is the symbol for new life, total commitment, and obedience in the kingdom of God. Those who need to be restored may find rebaptism a powerful aid in

confirming their commitment to follow Jesus. Baptism is the symbol of the life that has been given over to God in sanctification. Baptism is the initiatory rite of the new covenant *in as much as it symbolizes the faith of the one who makes this commitment*, however basic or limited his or her knowledge of Christ may be at the time. Persons will grow from immaturity and simple faith to matured faith, love, and commitment throughout life as the Holy Spirit continually transforms them in the sanctifying process. Age is not a factor in this journey.

The new covenant community is not characterized by outward signs but inward faith. As circumcision was the sign of one born in the old covenant, baptism is the sign of one born again in the new covenant (John 3:5; Phil 3:1). Faith in Jesus is the essential requirement for this new birth (John 3:16). The outward act of baptism testifies to this commitment and confirms it.

One of the problems with saying that a physical act is the initiation in the new covenant is that it can give a false sense of security. Evidently, some Judaizers had been teaching the believers in Galatia that they needed to be circumcised in order to be Christians. Paul responds with strong words in his letter to the Galatians. He writes, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Gal 5:6). And later, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation” (6:15). He writes to the Romans, “It is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants” (Rom 9:8). The baptism of infants has the potential of becoming a similar false promise and even legalistic trap as circumcision was to some early Christians.

C. Removing Original Sin

A third argument for infant baptism is that it is the sacrament for prevenient grace and removes the guilt of original sin. John Wesley followed the position of Augustine and argued

that everyone is born under the guilt of Adam's sin. Infants are sinful at birth and guilty of original sin because of Adam. Wesley argued that baptism washes away the guilt of original sin as representative of the merits of Christ's death. Death is the proof that everyone has original sin. He states, "This plainly includes infants; for they too die; therefore, they have sinned: But not by actual sin; therefore, by original; else what need have they of the death of Christ? . . . 'It is certain, by God's word, that children who are baptized, dying before they commit actual sin are saved.' And this is agreeable to the unanimous judgment of all the ancient Fathers."²² Wesley argues that infants are not held accountable for Adam's sin because of the merits of Christ's death, which is experienced through prevenient grace. Although Wesley does not make an explicit connection between prevenient grace and infant baptism, Staples argues, "Prevenient grace is not conveyed by infant baptism, but it is *proclaimed* by it."²³ Yet, as Staples realizes, this position lacks clear biblical support. In fact, it could be argued that baptism is not needed to resolve the problem of original sin or even to proclaim prevenient grace because infants are not culpable for original sin at all. Death is a consequence of Adam's sin and comes to human beings, including Jesus, but no one is guilty of Adam's sin but only the sin that each person commits in rejection of God's light. Baptism of believers deals with the problem of Adam's sin by proclaiming in faith the hope in resurrection and the experience of this power now in new life through consecration and openness to the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom 6:4). It serves no purpose in the plan of salvation to connect infant baptism to prevenient grace, but to connect believer's baptism to the removal of the power of sin over a person has strong biblical and theological support.

²² Wesley, "Treatise on Baptism," 190.

²³ Staples, *Outward Sign*, 179.

D. Baptism as an Act of God

Another point that Rob Staples argues is that “Baptism is a sign of our repentance and faith, but this is not its primary significance. Primarily, it is a sign of divine grace—not a sign of anything *we do* at all.”²⁴ Baptism shows God’s initiative towards us and only secondarily and consequentially shows our active response to God. Staples even makes the bold claim that “In the New Testament, baptism is not a witness to faith, but a witness to the grace of God.”²⁵ This may be interpreted as simply a rhetorical overstatement by Staples, but it has significant repercussions in light of the clear biblical evidence examined at the beginning of this paper. It is clear in the New Testament that we are saved because of God’s grace, but this salvation is always dependent upon the freewill choice of faith (Rom 3:24; Eph 2:8-9). The clear pattern throughout Scripture is that salvation is a response to God’s grace, however limited this response may be. Baptism is the physical representation of this response of faith and should lead to the obedience of walking in holiness and love as a person grows into Christlikeness throughout life. Nowhere in the New Testament does it say that baptism is an act of God. Rather, it is the human response to God’s action which has brought a person to the point of faith. This is not to diminish the work of God’s grace through the act of baptism, because the Holy Spirit is at work whenever we confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 12:3).

VI. Implications of Infant Baptism for Discipleship

The Church of the Nazarene is growing around the world. People are coming to faith in Christ from all sorts of religious backgrounds. Neville Bartle has personally baptized people who came out of the practice of tribal religions in Papua New Guinea. He has also assisted in the

²⁴ Staples, *Outward Sign*, 181.

²⁵ Staples, *Outward Sign*, 196.

baptism of people who have destroyed their Hindu images and other paraphernalia and come from the polytheism of Hinduism to faith in Christ. He has baptized former Muslims and also people from Mainland China. For these people, the passages of Scripture that is most significant to them are the descriptions of Jesus' baptism and Paul's words in Romans 6. Baptism is an identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They also realize that their baptism could also lead to physical death or social rejection and disinheritance. The Chinese professor of philosophy whom Neville helped baptize was leaving in a few days to go back to Mainland China and did not know what he would face but wanted to be baptized before he went back. The relationship between baptism and death and resurrection was very significant to him. This emphasis seems to be strangely lacking in Staples.

If we say that infant baptism and believer's baptism are identical, then what message are we sending to those parts of the world where the church is facing death and persecution? Experientially, infant baptism and believer's baptism are very different. In infant baptism, the participant has no repentance, no knowledge of salvation and no faith in Christ. In believers baptism, the participant takes place because they have repented of their sins, believed in Christ and are identifying themselves with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and publicly declaring that they are part of the family of God and the church of Jesus Christ. We are a global church and many of our people do not have access to theology books. They have the Bible and they are more interested in what Jesus, Peter, John, and Paul said than what some theologian may write. They want to express their beliefs in meaningful ceremonies that strengthen their faith and help them to identify with God's story especially his death and resurrection. Instead of promoting infant baptism we should be emphasizing baby dedication which has clear biblical support and can be a very meaningful occasion to welcome new babies into the church

community. It is time for parents to give thanks to God, to seek his blessing on their child and declare their intention to bring the child up to love and follow Christ. We are not recommending that infant baptism be banned but we do want the church to emphasize believer's baptism as a vital part of Christian discipleship.

Conclusions

We offer the following conclusions and recommendations:

1. In the New Testament, faith is consistently associated with baptism and it is always the faith of the one being baptized.
2. Anything that is stated as an Article of Faith in the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene needs to have support from Scripture. As Article IV states, "whatever is not contained therein is not to be enjoined as an article of faith." Although infant baptism can be supported through theological reasoning and has been practiced by parts of the church for centuries, it lacks clear support from Scripture.
3. Support for infant baptism often uses incorrect deductive hermeneutics. The text of the New Testament is clear in who should be baptized and for what reason. We must read the text of the Bible carefully and use an inductive hermeneutical approach to arrive at theological tenets that will guide the church into effective evangelism and discipleship around the world.
4. The earliest church did not practice infant baptism, but infant baptism was introduced later to resolve concerns about infant mortality and a certain doctrine of original sin.
5. How the church refers to baptism by emphasizing infant baptism confuses people today, especially in world areas where the church is growing rapidly.
6. The Church of the Nazarene and its theologians and pastors have an opportunity to develop further the theology of baptism as it relates to our holiness doctrine. Baptism is connected in the New Testament to the work of the Holy Spirit who transforms us into Christlikeness, with baptism being an outward sign of this sanctifying work.
7. If infant baptism is to continue in the Church of the Nazarene, it will be helpful to clarify whether it is a sacrament or a practice. If this is going to be a matter of continued Article of Faith, it should be thus clarified. Can something so disputed and unverifiable in the Bible stand the test of an Article of Faith?
8. This paper does not intend to reject infant baptism as a practice of the church, because this could create unnecessary division. But we are calling for an honest look at Article XII and the literature that is produced through our publication systems. Our purpose

is not to divide the church but to clarify the issue and call for a more robust theology of baptism.