

Baptism: a true biblical understanding **but an unbiblical application!**

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**How baptism is being understood in the CoC, ICOC, ICC, Restore Church worldwide
and all the other denominations that will split from them:**

Here are the two doctrinal positions that all those denominations have in common:

- 1) They all believe that baptism is necessary to be saved and indeed there are plenty of verses that clearly show that salvation is linked to baptism. So to say that salvation is a process that starts with faith, continues with repentance and finishes with baptism is perfectly biblical and I fully support and teach this view myself.
- 2) But they do not stop here. They teach that:
“If you did not precisely understand at the time when you were baptized that baptism was for salvation or the remission of your sins”, then:
your baptism was not biblically valid, and therefore:
you were not saved,
you are not a Christian and
you need to be rebaptized for that very reason.
By doing this you will be joined to the true Church, the Church of Christ

So, although they have an understanding of baptism that is biblical, to claim that millions of believers in Jesus are all going to hell because they do not share the same understanding is a position I cannot support. Here are my biblical reasons:

- **It is totally arbitrary and inconsistent.**

They decide that only one aspect of baptism matters, others are less relevant. Just ask them the following question: “According to Acts 2:38 we are not only baptized for the remission of sins, but to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, right? So when you were baptized, did you clearly and precisely understand what it means to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit ?”

If they are honest, most of them will tell you: “No, not really”. Now, with that faulty understanding, do they rebaptize their own people ? Definitely not, or else they would have to rebaptize a lot of their members!!!! Is this a consistent view? Obviously not, so let me ask you:

- **Who decides that only one aspect matters more than all others?**

Why is it that the gift of the Holy Spirit of Acts 2:38 matters less for a valid baptism than the remission of sins? What about ALL the other benefits of baptism? Who decides that one aspect is more crucial than the others? For instance if someone told you: "When you were baptized did you clearly understand and believe that you would be clothed with Christ? Yes or no? Did you precisely do this in order to have a good conscience? Yes or no?" Ok, two times you said no, your baptism was not valid, you are not a Christian!" How would you react to this?

Would you not say: "I got baptized out of obedience and to start a new life (which is what most evangelicals believe). What makes you think that being clothed with Christ and having a good conscience is superior and invalidates my own view? Who are you to decide that my "limited" or possibly wrong view is sending me to hell?"

As you can see, the problem with this pick and choose approach is not only that it arbitrarily defines who is a Christian or not, but it leads to another major problem:

- **All other steps for salvation are open to be redefined.**

If we must believe only certain aspects of baptism so that it is valid, what about all other steps of salvation? For instance, how much understanding of Christ's humanity and divinity should we have before we are baptized? How much understanding of the Gospel should we have? What about repentance? How far should we go to get rid of our sins? And which ones? What about confessing that Jesus is Lord? What would this mean practically? As you can see this opens a huge can of legalistic worms!!! There is almost no limits to redefine how much one must understand and change before baptism! What is problematic with this approach is that:

- **Biblical examples lack explicit formula:**

The book of Acts never insists on one specific aspect like clear understanding of "remission of sins" for baptism or anything else to make it valid. There is no complete formulation or creed needed before baptism, except a simple spontaneous faith in Christ. In fact...

- **All the conversions in Acts happen within a very short time.**

Just take for example the three thousands who were baptized in Acts 2. They heard a 5 minute sermon, and all they understood is that Christ was the promised Messiah and they had crucified him! After this they are all immediately baptized. This clearly demonstrates that not much knowledge was expected or transferred before baptism, therefore:

- **New converts were often theologically immature:**

In Acts, converts were baptized immediately after hearing a very brief presentation of the gospel. For instance the Philippian jailer had a very limited understanding of anything, not only because he was not a Jew, but because he had only a few hours before he was baptized. In fact:

- **The Holy Spirit touched unbelievers even before baptism:**

Cornelius and his household received the Holy Spirit before baptism. This shows not only that God had accepted them (and this is why Peter immediately baptizes them), but that God's life was already working in them before baptism. This forces us to review our understanding of salvation:

- **Salvation is “starting a transforming relationship with Christ”**

It is not about checking all the boxes of a salvation checklist or saying that only the last box matters. The emphasis of the entire Bible is having a living relationship with God, and as we increasingly trust and obey God, He gives us more of His Spirit. In other words, it is a process.

Take the example of a pregnancy: Life already starts at conception, and as it grows it eventually results in a birth! So is it with salvation. From the first second we start to believe in God, His life starts to work in us, and eventually it goes all the way to baptism (in fact it goes after!). In other words, salvation, which is the life of God, already starts long before baptism! No mother will tell you that the baby in her womb is not her child or that it has no life! So it is with God, we already are his children before baptism, but obviously we must finish our full course until baptism, or else we will end up as a “spiritual still birth”. To put it differently:

- **Baptism is a final response, not a test:**

Acts 2:38 and all other passages in Acts invite people to be baptized *in response* to what Christ did for them and not as a test of what they understood and did correctly. Gal. 3:26-27 clearly shows that we are all sons of God because of our faith, and this is why we respond with baptism, and not the other way around. This is why:

- **There is NO Re-baptism in Acts for a lack of full understanding:**

The only re-baptism in Acts 19:1–5 was due to being baptized into John, not in Jesus. It had nothing to do with a misunderstanding of the purpose of baptism. They had an entirely different baptism, like for instance infant baptism today, instead of having a normal Christian baptism.

IN FACT LATER ON:

- **Church Fathers did not demand detailed understanding:**
Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and others emphasized repentance and faith before baptism, not understanding its precise theological effect.
- **Rebaptism was condemned in Church history:**
The early church (e.g., Council of Nicaea, 325 AD) often rejected rebaptism unless the first baptism was into a non-Christian heretic sect.
- **Church history shows doctrinal development:**
Early Christians didn't always articulate doctrines precisely (e.g., the Trinity took centuries to formalize). Yet their faith and baptisms were not reinterpreted retroactively and rejected.

CONCLUSION:

- **A full or even correct theological comprehension is not required at the time of baptism.**

The best proof of this is when Paul writes to the Roman believers: "Do you NOT know that all of us who were baptized?" If Paul had to remind and explain the very basics of baptism, it shows clearly two facts: either they had forgotten why they were baptized, or they hardly knew anything about it! Either way this shows clearly that they had never received a thorough preparation for baptism.

The Philippian jailer and the Ethiopian eunuch didn't know much about baptism neither. Yet when the eunuch asked, "What prevents me from being baptized?" the answer was surprisingly simple: "If you believe with all your heart." In other words, sincere faith was all that was needed! (Interestingly, this verse doesn't even appear in most early manuscripts—suggesting that even the early Church saw simple faith at that stage as being enough.)

The faith of most evangelical Christians today at baptism is not different than the one of those early Christians: even if they do not have the full or even correct picture, most of them correctly believe in Christ (in fact, they know far more than early believers!) they understand baptism as symbolizing death and a new life, and many do it as a sincere step of obedience. This forces us to admit the following:

- **Legalism is the culprit behind this faulty application of baptism.**

What is so deceiving and tragic about legalism is that we can have a perfectly right understanding of a certain concept, and yet make wrong conclusions that give us the right to judge and exclude others. For instance Paul saw nothing wrong with

circumcision (he himself circumcised Timothy), but when Galatians used this as a way to elevate themselves above others and condemn them, he got mad.

In other words, to believe that baptism is part of a salvation is perfectly biblical, but what is unbiblical is to see anyone who does not have the exact same understanding as going to hell. Paul never made that conclusion, as we saw this in Romans 6.

This paper has made it abundantly clear that conversions in Acts were spontaneous and simple and this is why people needed more explanations afterwards. The trickery of legalism is that it opens the door to endless rebaptisms based on developing knowledge.

This is why the CoC rebaptizes people on not having the exact knowledge before baptism. This is why the ICOC takes it even to a step further by rebaptizing anyone who did not have the “right” behavior or understanding of what a disciple is before baptism. This is why Oneness Pentecostals will rebaptize those who were baptized in the trinitarian formula instead of Jesus only. As you can see, legalism will never go too far and it will never be enough. Someone must have the courage to stop this and boldly proclaim:

- **Let us restore the unity, the power and the simplicity of the early Church, without creeds and without legalism!**

Two hundred years ago the Restoration Movement brought a powerful message of unity to a religious world divided by all kinds of denominations. It grew tremendously, but eventually legalism took over and stopped it. Today most Churches of Christ are in decline. Other groups like the ICOC have tried to build upon this legalistic foundation of the CoC, but they have all miserably failed. The reason? No Christian movement in history has ever succeeded by being self-righteous. God hates legalism and He will never bless it. It is one thing to seek the truth and humbly sharing it with others, it is another to use it as a means to condemn and exclude others.

As John Mark Hicks¹, a professor at Lipscomb University eloquently wrote: “For Alexander Campbell transformation then, was more important than baptism itself, and this is precisely because baptism served the goal of transformation and was not itself the goal. Campbell led believers down in the river to experience the assurance of God’s gracious forgiveness as part of God’s transforming work, but some of his theological descendants went down in the river to draw a line in the sand. They turned baptism into a legal technicality rather than a divine work of transforming assurance.”²

¹ My pilgrimage started with his book “Hicks, John Mark and Greg Taylor. Down in the River to Pray: *Revisioning Baptism as God’s Transforming Work*. Siloam Springs, AR: Leaf wood Publishers, 2004” and have taken most of my concepts from the diverse articles on baptism that Hicks has on his website <http://johnmarkhicks.wordpress.com>

² www.johnmarkhicks.files.wordpress.com/2009/06/consensus-tigurinus.doc, accessed March 19, 2010