

From Baptism and Back Again

There and back again is the subtitle to the children's book *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien (1937). It is the journey of a small hobbit from Hobbiton in the Shire to the Lonely Mountain on the other side of Middle Earth. Along the way he passes through many dangers but in the end returns safely home.

There is another epic story that could bear a similar name, though we'd have to call it something like *From Baptism and Back Again*. It is a story of the loss and then the subsequent rediscovering of the practice Jesus commanded as the New Covenant sign in Matthew 28:19–20; believer's baptism by immersion (credo-baptism; *credo* means to believe, henceforth CB, by immersion CBI). CBI is the "one baptism" of the Faith (Eph 4:5).¹ In the New Testament CBI speaks of the subject (believer), the mode (immersion) and most beautifully corresponds to the symbolism of Christ's death and resurrection. While recognizing some gaps in the earliest sources and great variety in some of the later, Everett Ferguson, who has written most comprehensively on the subject, said:

There is general agreement that there is no firm evidence for infant baptism before the latter part of the second century...[and as a continuation of early practice]...It is the contention of this study that [continuation of immersion] best accords with the available facts...the literary, art and archaeological evidence supports this conclusion".²

Essentially the story goes like this...the Church in Acts and the earliest Patristic period practiced CBI. The word *baptizo* means to immerse and every instance of baptism in the NT is of believer's and every description by immersion (c.f. [What is Baptism](#) to explore more of the biblical foundations). The late 2nd century work on church practice, the *Didache*, vii, states "immerse...into living water" [e.g. a river]. The earliest discovered church building in Dura Europas (c. AD 250) houses a baptistery for immersion [lower left], as do later church buildings (e.g. Ephesus). Likewise, early Christian art (early 3rd century catacombs) depict the believer in water about to be baptized, as do later mosaics, which are more picturesque.



Figure 2- Baptistery at Dura Europas, c. 250



Figure 1-Mosaic at Ravenna, c. 5th century

¹ The controversy over baptism is not a saving matter (churches are more and less pure, *WCF* 26.5), however, as the sign of the New Covenant it is a secondary matter of high importance that can impact other beliefs and practices (e.g. PB can instill a false sense of assurance).

² Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*. (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009), 856–857.

The first literary evidence of PB is as a new phenomenon and is well documented by Tertullian (150–225).³ He opposed PB's introduction into the churches of his day.

“According to the circumstance and nature, and also age, of each person, the delay of baptism is more suitable, especially in the case of small children... The Lord indeed says, ‘Do not forbid them to come to me.’ Let them ‘come’ then while they are growing up, while they are learning, while they are instructed why they are coming. Let them become Christians when they are able to know Christ.”⁴

Tertullian decried the growing nominalism of his day that led to this practice. Christianity was becoming acceptable (and in 380 became the official religion of the Roman Empire). Nominalism and acceptability, the growing fear for the souls of infants because of the perfection of the doctrine of Original Sin, and even 4th century paganization, pushed the bounds of who could be baptized and how at an unprecedented rate. Though immersion continued to be practiced alongside PB until the 5–7th centuries (and until the 13th in warmer climates), from the 3–5th centuries PB increasingly became the passport of Western Christendom (Church+State). (Interesting disused lead baptismal tanks have been found from Roman Britain that mark this transition).

PB was the accrual of human tradition that Jesus warned against in Mk 7:7. This culminated in the Roman Catholic 4th Lateran Council's (1215) formalization of PB as a sacrament that dispensed grace (baptismal regeneration). While at least one medieval dissenting group rejected PB (the Petrobrusians), it remained the practice of the Western Church until the Reformation. (As a counterpoint to Western PB the Eastern Orthodox Church does baptize infants yet their mode remains immersion—both for infants and adult converts. Roman Catholics christen both infants and adults).

At the Reformation a number of groups sought to reform the Church to its NT origins. PB Reformers (Lutheran and Reformed) wrestled with how to synchronize justification by faith and PB. The most radical of the Reform groups were the Anabaptists (re-baptizers for they ‘re-baptized’ Catholics who had already been ‘baptized’). One group were the Swiss Anabaptists who decried PB in 1527 as, “the highest and chief abomination of the pope.”⁵ Though not all Anabaptists practiced immersion they all did practice CB. This was seen as a radical and subversive act because PB was seen as one's European passport.

Stemming from the English Reformation, the English Baptists (c. 1640) took reform to its logical conclusion. Seeing the mixed nature of the Anglican Church as false they separated themselves and formed believing congregations that practiced CBI. The First London Baptist Confession (1644) says:

39. That Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, given by Christ, to be dispensed only upon persons professing faith, or that are Disciples, or taught, who upon

³ Tertullian was an elder in the church in Carthage (North Africa). He was a prolific writer in early Christianity and an apologist for the faith.

⁴ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 18.

⁵ Schleithem Confession, 1527.

a profession of faith, ought to be baptized (Added later: "...and after to partake of the Lord's Supper.")

40. The way and manner of the 1 dispensing of this ordinance the Scripture holds out to be dipping or plunging the whole body under water: it being a sign, must answer the thing signified, which are these: first, the 2 washing the whole soul in the blood of Christ; secondly, that interest the saints have in 3 death, burial, and resurrection (of Christ) ; thirdly, together with a 4 confirmation of our faith, that as certainly as the body is buried under water, and rises again, so certainly shall the bodies of the saints be raised by the power of Christ, in the day of the resurrection, to reign with Christ.

Thus, the Gospel ordinance of CBI was rediscovered. Since then, it has extended to hundreds of millions of not only Baptists but Pentecostals, Community Churches, Free Evangelicals, etc. (Even some PB at times practice CBI with adults. Most PB likewise concede PB was not the earliest practice). Some 50% of global Christians practice immersion and at least 35% practice CBI.

What was once lost, through reform, has been recovered and continues to be rediscovered. That is the story *From Baptism and Back Again*.

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