



# THE WATER THAT DIVIDES





This revised and updated version (of *The Water that Divides*) is a model of the informed, respectful and irenic dialogue of which Evangelicalism stands in continual need. The final chapter, which sensitively sets baptismal practice within today's context, is a particularly valuable survey, whatever our stance on the cluster of issues which gather under the canopy of 'post-modernism'. This is an invaluable text for all involved, at every level, with Christian initiation and local church membership.

Bruce Milne





# THE WATER THAT DIVIDES



*Two views of Baptism Explored*



Donald Bridge  
&  
David Phypers

CHRISTIAN  
**FOCUS**





© Donald Bridge and David Phypers

ISBN 978-1-84550-308-6

Published in 1998

Reprinted in 2007

by

Christian Focus Publications,  
Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire,  
IV20 1TW, Great Britain.

Cover design by Daniel Van Straaten

Printed by Nørhaven Paperback A/S, Denmark

First published in 1977 by Inter Varsity Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying. In the U.K. such licences are issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, Saffron House, 6-10 Kirby Street, London, EC1 8TS. [www.cla.co.uk](http://www.cla.co.uk)







## INTRODUCTION



One of Jesus' last recorded commands to his followers was, 'Go... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt. 28:19). Most of his followers have obeyed his command. With the rare exception of groups like the Quakers and the Salvation Army, Christians of all traditions, denominations and persuasions have regarded baptism as the means of entry into the church. Yet despite this, perhaps no other command of Christ has occasioned so much controversy, division, bitterness and mutual mistrust. Christians have attacked each other, verbally and physically, with a ferocity strangely at variance with him who constantly exhorted his disciples to 'love one another' (John 15:12, 17).

Today, thankfully, the bitterest language has abated, and Christians rarely ill-treat each other over baptismal issues. Tolerance abounds. 'Best let sleeping dogs lie', seems to sum up the mood of most lay Christians, as they explore neighbourly relationships with believers of other traditions, via united Lenten services, area evangelistic missions and joint action against injustice. Meanwhile the professionals (theologians, bishops, ecumenical officers and the like) take an occasional cautious prod at the recumbent animals, only to find that dogs still bite. The corporate scars remain. Where there is peace of a kind, it is based more on a mixture of nervous defensiveness, misinformation or sheer boredom than on any godly consensus. And wherever there is life and progress in the churches (as increasingly there is, thanks be to God) the





animals wake up and leap into action, in a disconcerting fashion.

Consider a few examples. Imagine a modern young man whose early religious pathway has been a typical one of baptism in infancy, sporadic attendance at Sunday school in childhood, and a tearless parting from the church in his teenage years in favour of the more alluring interests of motorcycle, girlfriend and disco. Then he meets vital Christianity for the first time. He is intrigued, impressed, troubled and eventually convinced. Christ becomes a reality. Life takes on new meaning. After a while he finds in baptism a rite tailor-made to express his new convictions. But what is this? His vicar is horrified. His new Christian friends are embarrassed. A Baptist minister down the road offers him baptism, or is it (whisper the word) re-baptism? Already, the Christian community which he was beginning to like and trust appears to be divided. He must make a decision for which he is ill-equipped, and which bewilderingly presents itself as a matter of group loyalty. What is he to do?

Here is quite a different problem. Middle-aged parents with growing children move into a new area. They are life-long committed Christians, used to taking pride in the fact that faith transcends denominational barriers. Bible conventions and evangelistic crusades, youth camps and united Weeks of Prayer have all underlined this fact, and, if truth be told, these parents are just a little bit derisive about the 'ecumaniacs' who want to merge the denominations and their structures. 'We already have spiritual unity! We are all one in Christ Jesus!' they exclaim dismissively. But what is this? In their new neighbourhood they look anxiously for a church that will honour the Bible, proclaim the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, provide teaching and attractive fellowship for their offspring. The name on the noticeboard matters little. Yet after finding such a church and attending for some time, they ask for membership - and the difficulties begin! If they were baptized as infants and later confirmed





the Baptist church may demand that they be rebaptized in order to enjoy the benefits and privileges of full membership. It is no longer enough to welcome them as brother and sister in Christ. If, on the other hand, they wish to enter fully into the life of the parish Church of England, sooner or later they will find they need to be confirmed. To believe and be baptized is not, apparently, enough after all.

A third example is common. Two Christians decide to marry. They come from different denominational churches, but they met at college in the cheerfully eclectic atmosphere of the Christian Union. Obviously they must settle for membership of one church, so one of them graciously steps down and offers to join the other's denomination. Splendid! Unfortunately, the wife (let us say) who has taken the humble place must now be humbled still further. Her husband, it seems, was initiated the right way, but she got it wrong. She must retrace her steps and be rebaptized or confirmed (whichever is required), contrary to her own convictions, for the sake of the family.

A fourth example is the saddest. The family are unabashed pagans, one and all. They hold the religion of the average Englishman; the belief that there may well be a God somewhere, but, as little is known about him, all that is required is to be as decent as the next man and kind to old ladies. A new baby arrives. Custom suggests (and grandmother insists) that something religious should be done. The vicar is called in. Presumably he sits in his vicarage waiting for little tasks like this, for that is his job. For a few precious moments the Christian church is touching the circle of interests of those it rarely reaches. But in the event, how pathetic is the occasion! The family stand apprehensively around the font at the back of an empty church. Hands are shaken with the vicar, and the party hurries home. Grandparents are satisfied, mother a little misty-eyed, father confirmed in his impression that religion has got nothing whatever to do with real life. Years later, if the growing child stumbles across some







evangelistic activity and is prompted to ask, 'Mummy, am I a Christian?' he receives the indignant reply, 'Of course you are! You were baptized, weren't you?'

All of these sad stories illustrate the fact that controversy about baptism is far from being an academic luxury for armchair theologians. The witness of the church when it touches the unconverted, and the unity of the church when it welcomes the converted, are both at stake. In 1996, a newspaper columnist renowned for her tart but perceptive comments, attended a 'society' christening, and afterwards wondered aloud about the required qualifications of parents and godparents. In this particular case, she averred, they numbered 'two adulterers, a drunk and an international arms dealer'. An Anglican priest with a powerful evangelistic ministry has just shared with one of the authors of this book, the fact that after anxious study of the Bible (and of this book's first edition!), he had delayed the baptism of his own three children, and was awaiting the time when they would freely take that step of faith and commitment which he almost daily urged upon others. 'But of course I believe they belong to God,' he added.

Most recently built Roman Catholic and Anglican churches in Greater London have tiled baptisteries suitable for adult baptism by immersion. One parish church not so equipped swings an industrial skip through the double doorway and fills it with water; the bishop has let it be known that he would prefer not to hear about it. In a recent joint Anglican-Baptist mission conducted by one of the authors of this book, the problem of baptism and rebaptism never arose, for, as the vicar explained, no-one in that pagan area ever thought of bringing babies to be baptized. In what may be England's oldest city, a Greek Orthodox church has been established, and is crowded every week; its liturgy, of course, makes provision for the baptism of infants and adults by immersion.

We, the authors, have faced situations where one of two unmarried partners has become a Christian, the other





still does not wish to marry, but they both agree that their children, born out of wedlock, should now begin to be brought up in the Christian faith. We have met mothers who now bitterly regret an abortion, and want to know how they may have some assurance as to the eternal fate of what they once called a foetus, but now see as a child. We could go on multiplying hair-raising examples of once unimagined implications of the baptismal debate.

We wrote the original edition of this book in 1977. We were friends who had worked together in the same 'closed membership' Baptist church; one as minister, the other as a deacon. Don had then moved on to pastor a large 'open membership' church which taught baptism for believers only, but did not require it for membership. Meanwhile David had begun training for the Anglican ministry, and had perforce to re-examine his beliefs and priorities. Both of us were deeply involved in evangelism, church growth and renewal. Fascinating though we found theology and history to be, our most urgent attention was directed to winning new disciples for Christ and his church, in an age of rapidly growing secularism and paganism. Our correspondence and heart-sharing led to the book being written.

It was well received, translated into Dutch, and published in the United States of America. Over the years we have often been urged to update and reprint it, and until that was possible many colleges, libraries and local churches have asked permission to photocopy the first edition. Now the original publishers, Inter-Varsity Press, have kindly agreed that Christian Focus should print a completely rewritten and updated book.

The rewriting has had to be more extensive than we first anticipated, and only four historical chapters remain almost unaltered. Events have moved on, in two decades of dramatic change within and without the churches. We can list some of them: church unity schemes, charismatic renewal, the growth of 'restoration churches', liturgical reform, the planting of thousands of new churches in what was once thought of as 'the





mission-field', the pervasiveness of postmodern attitudes which devalue doctrine and logic but value experience and symbol. All of these factors focus attention on the great baptismal questions. What is the meaning and purpose of baptism? Who should be baptized, and how should it be administered? Does anything actually *happen* in baptism? Why do Christians disagree on so basic an issue? Are differences of opinion sufficient to threaten our basic oneness as Christians? Can we afford to spend energy on point-scoring, when a world is dying without Christ?

We make no claim to resolve the issues which have divided Christians for two thousand years. But we believe that Christians should face these issues fairly and squarely. We should learn to live together in understanding rather than in ignorance.

Hence we begin by looking at New Testament references to Christian baptism and drawing conclusions from them. Next we concentrate on elucidating the reasons why some Christians believe that adult converts and their children should be baptized, while others are willing to baptize adult converts only.

Thirdly, we show how these questions arose at various times in history, and were never a matter of pure theology. Rather, they were thrown up by cultural, emotional, religious and political factors. To use a postmodern phrase, a living 'text' (biblical teaching about baptism) took on various lives, and became 'styled' in radically different ways at different times. The question, How can I follow Christ today? became rightly and inevitably entangled in questions like, Who do I perceive myself to be?, In what kind of society do I live?, What does Christian discipleship have to say, in judgment and in hope, to that society?

Finally, we look at the situation today, sum up the new issues raised as the church confronts rampant paganism in a pluralistic age, and make practical suggestions whereby Christians might succeed in worshipping and working together without surrendering cherished beliefs and practices.





Throughout the book the word ‘paedobaptist’ will be used to describe those who accept the validity and necessity of baptizing infants and little children incapable of conscious faith. The word ‘baptist’ (with a small ‘b’) will describe all others who insist on the need for conscious faith to precede baptism. Such baptists are not necessarily adult baptists, so we have usually avoided that phrase. Not all baptists are Baptists (with a capital ‘B’); baptist belief extends far beyond specifically named Baptist churches and denominations. In recent years the word ‘baptistic’ has come into increasing use, but we have used it here only sparingly.

