

December 2024

Dear Brethren:

The topic of baptism is often of interest to God's people, and it has many aspects of importance that are worthy to be explored.

The purpose of this *Monthly Letter* will not be to focus upon the basic spiritual command of baptism itself, but to explain how Church of God, The Eternal has always *administered this sacred ordinance* in a practical sense for God's Church. For a good foundation of the topic, please read our article entitled, *Baptism: A Command of God—Why? When? How?* This article was published in 1986 and confirms the basic principles from the Bible, hearkening back to the very doctrine taught by Mr. Herbert Armstrong to the Radio Church of God from the early twentieth century. This same philosophy was continued without deviation by Mr. Raymond Cole after 1974 for this remnant fellowship. It is still the very same application used consistently by our ministry today, more than twenty years after the death of Mr. Cole. There has been no change.

That fact is important, because the spiritual counsel that we give to specific members can become controversial. If this ministry asserts to someone that his past baptism is not valid in God's eyes, that may be hard to swallow. On the other hand, there are some cases when we advise strongly that a previous baptism in another splinter group *was indeed valid*, and therefore we refuse to "re-baptize." In either case, when individuals have their own basis for judgment which differs from ours, it can become uncomfortable. The point is, that in the words of Al Pacino from the movie, *The Godfather*, "It's not personal . . . It's strictly business," meaning that this ministry is not making judgments about baptisms for the sake of personal bias or selfish preference. We truly are seeking to "follow the script" that was revealed by Jesus Christ to His chosen servant in our age. We would love to be able to tell everyone exactly what he wants to hear. But violating these *well-established guidelines* in order to make one individual feel better would involve doctrinal compromise. We have to put God first! Hopefully, by laying out the following blueprint, all of you will be able to see the reason—"the method in our madness"—for the doctrinal yardstick that we use to give advice and counsel to God's beloved children.

Baptism Required

We cannot discuss the administrative aspects of baptism without a succinct confirmation of the baptismal ordinance itself. According to God's instituted Plan, there is no path to salvation for man without submitting to baptism:

He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned (Mark 16:16).

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy [Spirit] (Acts 2:38).

It is the Spirit that imparts eternal life (1 John 5:11–12; Romans 8:9–11). A *down payment* of that Spirit at baptism is required to become *quicken*ed with a spiritual life force:

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but *quicken*ed by the Spirit (1 Peter 3:18) [emphasis mine throughout].

This *quicken*ing is not a gift of immortality. It is merely a spiritual begetting, directly comparable to the beginning of a new baby's life in a mother's womb. That vulnerable little child depends entirely upon his mother for life, and cannot live on his own until coming to full development. But the very *start of that life* begins at conception, and baptism is used by God to describe *the beginning of spiritual life* in the womb—in the church—as *a child of God*. It applies to any human being desiring to be born ultimately into the God Family.

What this all means is that the ordinance of baptism is no trivial thing.

Will Just Any Baptism Do?

A lot of churches baptize. They read the same Bible that we do and take seriously this command in order to have hope of salvation. The Catholics christen infants. Many churches splash a little water on someone in some version of a man-made ritual. A few churches actually immerse the initiate fully under the water. But how many of these practices by multitudes of churches actually lead to one becoming *begotten of God by His Spirit into the true Body of Christ—His one and only Church*? All of them? Any of them? How will you make that decision?

It is easy to say, "Well, I was sincere in seeking God, so I am certain that my baptism was legitimate, even before I knew the real Truth." But, this assumes that *personal sincerity* is the only criterion for a baptism to be real. That is not true! God made sure to record enough evidence in the Bible for us to know that He has *specific requirements* to be followed, and that He is adamant about that process.

There are many in the world using the name of Jesus Christ who are not acceptable to Him (Matthew 7:21–23). We are warned of the need to discern between the *one true Christ* and those myriad fake Christs in this world (1 John 2:18–22). Never forget that one of the "powers" craved by these religious hucksters—as well as those who are sincerely deceived—is the ability to impart God's Holy Spirit by the laying on of their hands:

But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God. And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries. But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Then *Simon himself believed also*: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done. Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John: Who, when they were come down, prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy [Spirit]: (For as yet [it] was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy [Spirit]. And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy [Spirit] was given, he offered them money, Saying, *Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy [Spirit]*. But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. *Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter*: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity (Acts 8:9–23).

Tradition tells us that this was none other than Simon Magus, who went on to set up a counterfeit church in the name of Jesus Christ, which is the mother of many of our false churches today. Do you really think that a baptism performed by Simon Magus became legitimate, just because a well-meaning, howbeit *deceived*, acolyte was "sincere" at that moment? Is God duty bound to induct someone into *the very Body of His Son as a begotten*

child, just because "some man" performed a baptismal ritual? Or, is it possible that the *Jealous God* that we serve (Exodus 34:14) is quite possessive of the right to control the initiation of all of His true children? Be very careful how you make that decision for yourself! You could adamantly assert that you are sure that you are begotten of God, but God knows whether that is true, or not. He is the One who will determine who will be born into His Family. If you were never yet truly begotten of God—because of clinging to the false notion that a previous baptism was sufficient, when it was not—and you refuse to be baptized in the correct way, who will be the one to lose out? You will! Convincing other human beings that you are already begotten of the Spirit is pointless. They are not the ones who hold the keys to your salvation. God is your Judge, and He is the One who knows if you are yet begotten!

Factors to Consider

There are several key factors that must be considered in order to know how to administer baptism correctly.

First, for any baptism to be legitimate, it must involve *the called people of God*, not the deceived masses of this world. Jesus said clearly:

No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:44).

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. *But every man in his own order*: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming (1 Corinthians 15:22–23).

The "Christian" churches of this world do not believe this is true! They assume that salvation is open to *all human beings right now*. They do not believe at all that God is calling only *very few* at this time. In fact, that concept is heresy to them. Nevertheless, only ones truly called by God—given the miracle of *an open mind* to hear and respond to God's invitation—can possibly be baptized legitimately. Any other attempt at baptism is just someone getting wet.

Second, the act of baptism is actually a *covenant with God*—a vow that we make. One cannot make a *legitimate vow* with God without understanding 1) *what is being promised*, and 2) *who truly is this God*.

Third, by God's instruction, only a true minister of Jesus Christ has God's authority to induct a new member into the Body of Christ. You cannot induct yourself, and neither can

someone who merely claims to have this authority. If one has not been specifically commissioned by Jesus Christ—ordained legitimately—he is forbidden to try to act as God's agent.

Note: This is not to say that Church of God, The Eternal refuses to accept baptisms performed by *any other group*, prior to a member joining our fellowship. As taught by Mr. Herbert Armstrong from the beginning, *we are not baptized into any denomination!* We are baptized into *the Body of Christ*, which is a spiritual entity, not a physical one. We have many current members in our fellowship today who were not baptized by one of our own ministers. But they were all ones called by God and baptized either in our parent church or else by one of the other organized remnant groups *who do have ministers originally ordained by the authority of Jesus Christ through Mr. Armstrong.* More on that point later.

All three of these basic requirements are involved in the rules that God's true Church uses to administer the ordinance of baptism. With that in mind, let us consider each one of them in more detail.

God Calls His Own Children

The churches of the world, by and large, believe that salvation is open to every single human being right now, and that if one does not "accept Jesus Christ" before death, he will forfeit any hope of salvation. This is false. God has *purposefully* left the majority of people in this world in utter spiritual darkness for now, and they will not even have their "first" opportunity to be introduced to God until after Jesus Christ returns to rule as King over this earth. According to God's perfect Plan, only *a very few* are being called right now, with even the possibility of "seeing" spiritual Truth and responding to it.

Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be *a kind of firstfruits of his creatures* (James 1:18).

If the concept of firstfruits is foreign to you, you need to study this fundamental doctrine which sets apart God's true Church from the many counterfeits. This understanding is found in the very fabric of our keeping of annual Holy Days, especially in the meaning of Pentecost, as distinguished from the meaning of the Feast of Tabernacles and Last Great Day. Anyone who supposes that he previously accepted Christ in baptism without understanding this *basic truth of God's dealing with man* was not yet ready to enter into a true covenant with Him. Again, it is not just about human sincerity and emotionalism. It is about the specific mechanics required by God.

And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but *to them it is not given* (Matthew 13:10–11).

Every single person on Earth will have his time of calling by God. But, God controls that process, not man. And no one who is not yet called of God can force his way into the Body of Christ. God simply will not permit it. One must first *receive that divine invitation* from God.

We have known ones who came to us and began keeping the weekly Sabbath and Holy Days, but only after several years of seeking Christ in one or more false Sunday-keeping churches. They profess that God "touched their heart" to seek Him, and that when they got baptized in a Protestant congregation, *they were sure that God accepted it*. When we have told them that such a baptism in a Sunday church was not legitimate, some have become offended and chosen not to walk with us anymore. Who are we (they say) to assume to know about *their very personal relationship with God?* Well, we do not claim to know how to read the hearts of anyone. But we do know that one not yet called by God—having the basics of *real knowledge* about His Truth—cannot yet be ready to make a covenant with that God. *The true calling of God must come first*. Only then does a process begin that can lead to a legitimate baptism.

True Vows Require Understanding

There is a reason that most worldly governments do not permit children to form legal contracts. It is commonly accepted that a child is not *competent* to make the decision to bind himself in a weighty, complex commitment. It requires one who has *attained maturity* to have the ability to comprehend and to be held accountable for a serious contractual promise. The exception to this rule might be the purchase of small food or drink items in a grocery store, for example. But to buy a car or a house, for instance, or to enter into a business deal, one must be mature enough to be considered *competent*. It is not only an issue of age. A typical minimum age might be eighteen or twenty-one, but there are also adults who may not be counted as competent because they lack the mental acuity needed. An elderly adult who has lost his short-term memory would be deemed incompetent, requiring a legal guardian to sign any legal contracts on his behalf. So the issue of *legal competency* is at the heart of all historical human legal systems. The same is true with God.

Marriage, for instance, involves a covenant between a man and a woman. They must each be "of age" to get married. The man offers marriage. If the woman says, "yes," she

accepts his invitation, and then after exchanging vows, she is married to him in a permanent covenant relationship.

Comparably, God invites one to become His child. If that child accepts the invitation, he or she agrees to be baptized (because that is what God requires), and then submits to a ritual including a promise—a vow—to God. Yes, getting baptized is indeed entering into a *legal contract with God*. It is also a *covenant*, meaning a *holy* contract. It is one of the most important vows that someone will ever make, and it requires *competency*!

To be competent to make a contract with God, the individual must first be called, as shown above. He must further understand what this contract with God really entails. One must understand what it is he is committing to. It is not about just going through the motions of making some ritualistic vow. It is about making that vow with *full understanding* of what is being promised!

The wording of the baptismal ordinance that we use—the exact same one used by Mr. Armstrong years ago—begins with this question, "Have you repented of your sins?" After the initiate answers in the affirmative, the next question is, "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior?" After a second affirmation, the minister then states, "Because you have repented of your sins, and accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, your Lord and Master, your High Priest in heaven, and your soon-coming King, I now baptize you into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ, which means by His authority—for the remission of all your sins."

Every element of that wording is important. It is not just fluffy, ritualistic mumbo jumbo. It is wording that forms the basis for a covenant with God. Saying "yes" to these questions requires a basic understanding of what he is agreeing to do.

Note: A legitimate baptism does not require being able to pass a test on *every doctrine of the church* beforehand. Not at all! The walk of a Christian is lifelong, and detailed learning happens over many years. We continually *grow* in grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18). That takes time, and yet we were also taught that once someone is sure of his calling and truly understands, baptism should not be delayed. So, waiting years in order to learn every detail is not the correct approach. A lot of this spiritual growth actually takes place *after one is baptized*, because the imparting of God's Spirit is what helps one to see even more and to discern how to apply the principles of revealed Truth.

Mr. Armstrong records in his autobiography that he even once baptized a man who had not yet accepted the need to stop eating pork. This man was still learning! But, he had learned enough, and shown fruits enough—by Mr. Armstrong's estimation—that he was truly

called of God, and sincere, being capable of responding to that call by entering into a covenant through baptism. Mr. Armstrong reasoned that if the man continued to be responsive to God's instructions, he would come to see the need to stop eating pork. But, that lack was not an impediment for this man to enter into a legitimate covenant with God in baptism to start his spiritual walk.

Just how much *understanding* is required in order to make a valid baptismal vow with God? Well, look again at the questions asked and answered in the ordinance:

- "Have you repented of your sins?"

No one can truly answer "yes" to this question who has not yet learned what is sin! Sin is the transgression of the Law (1 John 3:4). Anyone who still believes that Christ "did away" with the Law has not yet even graduated from spiritual Kindergarten. One must understand that the Ten Commandments were never done away, but instead, that Christ actually *magnified them* (Matthew 5:17), making them even *more far-reaching* in our lives than mere physical obligations. It is impossible for one to claim to have truly repented of his sins unless he has rejected the worldly doctrine of grace as doing away with the Law. Grace is the *unmerited pardon* of our *past sins*, not a "get out of jail free card" allowing us to sin in the future without penalty (Romans 3:25). No one can be legitimately baptized into the Body of Christ without understanding this basic Truth.

- "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior?"

How can anyone who does not know who is the real Jesus Christ, competently say "yes" to this question? Did you accept that Jesus Christ is one of two Beings who are called God, who had no beginning (John 1:1–2)? Did you understand that the God of the Old Testament—who brought all things physically into existence and dealt with man—was not the Father, but the One who became Jesus Christ (verse 3)? If you did not understand the fundamental Truth of *the nature of God doctrine*, but were instead still steeped in false notions from counterfeit churches, how could you competently vow to accept this *true Christ* as your Savior? You have to know Him first!

No, you did not need to understand the full complexity of teachings about God and Jesus Christ, but you needed to know the *bare-bones basics*, enough to comprehend how the *true Christ* differs from all of these false Christs in the world.

Did you understand that man does not have an immortal soul, but is absolutely subject to death and without hope, barring a *miraculous resurrection from the dead* (1 Corinthians 15)? The very ordinance of baptism pictures the death of the old self and a new commitment to crucifying the natural thinking to make room for the thinking of Christ in a life-long

commitment of overcoming and bearing spiritual fruit (Romans 6:6; Ephesians 4:22–24). Not one of us could fathom, at the beginning, the totality of what this actually entails. But did you at least understand that this is the program that God has laid out in order to offer salvation to mankind?

Note: Do not make the mistake of questioning your legitimate baptism because you worry that you did not "understand enough" at the time, given how much more you have learned since your first calling. Doubting your *legitimate baptism* can become just as deadly as clinging to a false baptism and justifying it. We have counseled many over the years that they are indeed baptized and should stop doubting it. The just shall live by faith (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11). If you possessed *the basic elements* being described here, you should accept in faith that you were indeed called of God, taught the basics of how His Truth differs from that of false churches, baptized legitimately, and then *go forward in confidence* to act upon your calling.

By Whose Authority?

The third key element required for any legitimate baptism is to have completed the physical ordinance as described above, and then also submitting to *the laying on of hands* under the auspices of a true minister of Jesus Christ. This, sadly, is a key element that has become a stumbling block for many. Notice this citation from our 1986 article, *Baptism: A Command of God—Why? When? How?*, p.19:

Since Christ commanded baptism, who then is authorized to do the baptizing? We read in John 4:1–3, "When therefore the Lord knew how the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, (Though Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples,) He left Judea, and departed again into Galilee." Now notice Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 1:14–17, "I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; Lest any should say that I had baptized in my own name. And I baptized also the household of Stephanus: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other. For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel. . . ." These texts demonstrate that it is not necessary to be baptized by an ordained minister. But, whoever does the baptizing must do so by the authorization of a true minister of God.

The issue, like it or not, is one of authority! Jesus Christ gets to pick His own representatives. He called and commissioned *hand-picked men* and sent them with His own authority:

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, *All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore*, and teach all nations, *baptizing them* [into] the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy [Spirit]: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen (Matthew 28:18–20).

The entire topic of this passage is about power. Christ begins by confirming that He had "all power" from His Father. Because of that fact—therefore—He told those hand-picked men to *go ye in His name*, as His authorized emissaries. And one of the powers they were to wield in Christ's name was the authority to baptize.

It is apostate Christianity that denies this delegated authority and seeks to justify anyone who wants to act as a minister of Jesus Christ. Protestant theology especially teaches that anyone and everyone can "have a ministry" of his or her choosing. If I "feel" a calling to serve, I can "start my own ministry." That is what many churches believe and teach today, but that concept is an abomination to the true Creator God. People do not volunteer for the ministry. They are called by God to that office, and that calling is *certified by an ordination by one wielding the authority to do so*. As the citation above states, the man who baptizes does not have to be ordained, but he has to be *sent specifically by one who is ordained!*

An historical example of that principle is documented in Mr. Cole's article entitled, *Church of God, The Eternal—Who We Are*. Mr. Cole describes being sent out by Mr. Armstrong after his third year of Ambassador College to pastor the churches in Oregon, which were in serious trouble in 1951:

For a number of reasons, I was chosen by Mr. Armstrong, even before ordination, to go out to these troubled areas and quell the unrest about Pentecost. These defensive measures took me to Portland, Oregon for a year—prior to graduation. My matriculation from college was postponed for one year.

Although not ordained yet as a minister by Mr. Armstrong until after completing his last year of college a year later, in 1952, he had been acting within those local churches under Mr. Armstrong's auspices to care for the sheep, including performing baptisms. The legitimate chain of authority cannot be ignored!

Confirmation of this truth can be found in many of our writings, available to be ordered or else read online at www.cogeternal.org. Of particular relevance, please read our *Monthly Letter* from June 2001, entitled, *Church Government and Delegation*. It was penned

by this author, but also signed by Mr. Raymond Cole before he died. It contains subheadings such as: *The Delegation Principle, Christ's Delegation, Hierarchy—A Dirty Word?*, and *Rejection of Authority Prophesied*. It will confirm the basis for our teaching that any baptism not performed under the auspices of a duly-ordained minister of Jesus Christ, does not result in spiritual begettal into the Body of Christ. Please also read our *Monthly Letter* from October 2008, *By What Authority Do We Exist as a Group?*

Again, this is not an attempt to claim that one must be baptized by one of our own ministers. We accept the authority of ministers in other groups who came out of *our same parent church*—The Worldwide Church of God—if they can trace their ministerial ordinations back to Mr. Armstrong, just as Raymond Cole did. Even though these groups all have departed from many of God's revealed doctrines—just as the Jews of Christ's day had done—they still hold God-given authority in certain areas:

Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, Saying, *The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat*: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, *that observe and do*; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not (Matthew 23:1–3).

These rulers still carried God's authority—they were not self-appointed usurpers—but they were not trusted to confirm the real Truth anymore, having corrupted it with the teachings of men (Mark 7:7). Yet, they were legitimate rulers in Jerusalem.

Likewise, to the extent that apostate ministers today were *duly ordained* through a chain of authority that links back to Herbert Armstrong, we accept that they still have God's authority to baptize. This presumes that they at least are still confirming the basic doctrines about the nature of God, nature of man, and what is sin. Although all of the other groups we know of have perverted the proper keeping of the Holy Days (such as Pentecost), have besmirched the doctrine of marriage, and embraced many other abominations, to the extent that they still have preserved the basic Truth that separates God's true Church from the Catholics and Protestants, they likewise still "sit in Moses' seat" for the conducting of baptisms. Take note that this applies to ones who first came to a knowledge of God's fundamental Truth within those fellowships before understanding *the whole Truth* that was originally taught before the apostasy of 1974. There are many who first started keeping the Sabbath and Holy Days in one of those other groups. They learned about who the true God is, and that the Law of God has not been done away. They showed evidence of a true calling by God, even if their initial exposure was within an apostate fellowship. They were baptized according to the traditional ritual, and at the hand of a man who was ordained by one who in turn was ordained by Mr. Armstrong. In every one of these kinds of cases, we have always accepted that the baptism is legitimate. We do not re-baptize ones just because they were not

baptized within our own fellowship. We are not like a number of other groups today which issue "certificates of baptism," and which teach that any other baptism is illegitimate. That very concept denies the principle we have already confirmed, that we are never baptized into any denomination, but into the very Body of Jesus Christ, spiritually.

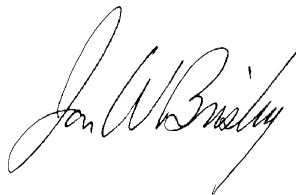
In other cases, new brethren have come to us out of small fellowships of past Worldwide Church of God members who *did not have* any properly-ordained leader. They had a leader who was merely a laymember of God's Church before, and for lack of having a true minister to teach them, this laymember "took on the mantle" to shepherd that little flock. The prophecy of God concerning His church in the last days has truly come to pass:

Then saith Jesus unto them, All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad (Matthew 26:31).

This happened in Christ's very day, after He was crucified. But Jesus was quoting a prophecy that applied also to the very last days, before His Second Coming (Zechariah 13:7). It is understandable that under chaotic circumstances, God's scattered sheep would seek to keep as many of His Truths as possible in the best way that they know how. But authority to anoint the sick (as another example), and to baptize, *can never be self-appointed*, no matter how sincere these sheep may be. In these cases, ones who finally find a home in our fellowship are advised to *become baptized legitimately*. It is not about our trying to be "the boss." We are simply carrying forward the very same rules that have always been a part of our doctrine.

If any one of you needs assistance in evaluating your own personal status within God's Church, we are very happy to help. All of you are most dear in God's eyes, and you deserve every bit of love and respect for who you are in God's Plan.

Your devoted friend and servant in Christ's name,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is written in black ink and is centered on the page.

Jon W. Brisby