

William
THE BAPTIST

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*A CLASSIC STORY of a MAN'S JOURNEY
to UNDERSTAND BAPTISM*

JAMES M. CHANEY

UPDATED BY
Ronald Evans



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FOREWORD

THE LATE DR. ROBERT C. MCQUILKIN, past president of Columbia Bible College, was asked by an able young Baptist student, “How do you answer *William the Baptist*?” Dr. McQuilkin replied, “I don’t; I agree with it!” And he continued with the statement that the book should be republished.

I was first introduced to James M. Chaney’s *William the Baptist* over thirty years ago while a student at Westminster Theological Seminary. It served to validate what I had been taught and had experienced growing up in a Presbyterian church. So I incorporated the arguments into my personal theology and practice, put the book away on my shelf, and went about my Christian life in an evangelical, nondenominational church.

But it is not easy being a paedobaptist—one who holds to infant baptism—in an evangelical world that is overwhelmingly baptistic—holding that only adult believers should be baptized. (How the majority of evangelicals became baptistic is for another day.) Recently, the elders of my church wrestled with an issue related to baptism. It became apparent to me that my fellow elders viewed my baby sprinkling as an uneducated, even unbiblical, practice. It was not merely that they disagreed with my position,

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but that they did not even know there was a biblical justification for infant baptism.

So off to my bookshelf I went to find my copy of *William the Baptist*. My copy was printed in the 1970s by Puritan Reformed Publishers, and was an exact reprint of Dr. McQuilkin's 1877 copy, which had been given to the publisher by James M. Chaney's widow.

Since the literary style and language of 1877 would not communicate well with today's audience, I undertook the discipline of preparing an updated version. In this day of biblical illiteracy, I hope this new edition will reveal to its readers the clear teaching of the Scripture on baptism and its mode and subjects. May it be refreshing and enlightening once again to have *William the Baptist* pose his questions—questions for which there are such satisfying answers.

Ronald B. Evans
Wayne, Pennsylvania
2009

INTRODUCTION

THE BIBLE IS THE BEST WORK on the subject of baptism. In the early part of my ministry, Mr. Staples, a man in my church, introduced me to a Mr. Pruitt, who wished to join the church. I told Mr. Pruitt that the elders were meeting in a few minutes and suggested that he present himself for admission to the church. After a moment's pause, he said, "I have a problem that makes that impossible." Upon inquiry, I found that he believed immersion was the proper mode of baptism. I told him that that was no difficulty; over in Devon there was a Baptist church where he would be welcomed. "But," he said, "I prefer the Presbyterian church for its doctrine."

Mr. Staples proposed to give him some books on the subject of baptism. My reply was, "Mr. Pruitt, let Staples's books alone. If you have set on immersion, my advice to you is to go and unite with the Baptist Church. But if you are not satisfied, take your Bible alone, and examine the subject in light of God's Word, praying for the guidance of the Spirit; after such examination, act according to the conclusion reached."

About four months after this conversation, Mr. Pruitt presented himself to the elders of our church for admission. I asked him whether he was satisfied on the question of baptism. His

answer was, "Thoroughly." He proved to be one of the most intelligent Bible Christians I ever knew, and a remarkable witness for the Lord. As I subsequently learned, every influence had been exerted on him to convince him that immersion is baptism.

What people want is a simple exposition of passages in the Bible with which they are familiar. In the following treatise I have confined myself to the Word of God alone, examining the subject by what I conceive to be an exhaustive method, which is:

- ✦ To ascertain the *meaning of the word* used to designate the rite, by examining the context and attending circumstances of each passage.
- ✦ To inquire into the *significance of the rite*, and see what light this throws on the question of mode.
- ✦ To examine the cases of baptism's administration as recorded in the New Testament, in light of *circumstantial evidence*.

I have chosen the conversational method of discussion because it serves better than any other to bring the attention of the reader to the particular point to be impressed on the mind. The only objection to such a method is that it offers the temptation to caricature the views we would assail. I have carefully endeavored to avoid such a weakness.

Much of the heresy prevailing in reference to the rite of baptism is chargeable to the neglect and indifference on the part of those who know and practice baptism the biblical way. It is regrettable that this ordinance is held in such light esteem by some. It is as important as the Lord's Supper. The Lord Jesus instituted both, and each for a specific purpose. If we are unconcerned that men pervert the one, why not the other?

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I would not complain of the zeal of any in their opposition to heresies concerning the Lord's Supper. But I would exhort those same contenders to show some measure of zeal against a heresy that would drag the sacred rite of baptism from the place assigned to it by Jesus—as a symbol of the Spirit's work—drag it down to the useless purpose of symbolizing, in a very awkward manner, an event that had *nothing to do* with man's redemption.

If we are in error, let us acknowledge it, and have our practice correspond with the truth. If our practice is in accordance with the command of the Savior, let us not hesitate to affirm that *immersion is not a scriptural mode of baptism*.

Some would object that the view that sprinkling is the only scriptural mode is too extreme, and judge it just as objectionable as the claims of the immersionists that the only scriptural mode is immersion. Moreover, the view of others is that one mode is as good as another, and that it is not a question worthy of discussion. But one must remember what is involved in that position: it implies that the significance of the rite is of no importance. We would not say that of the Lord's Supper. Transubstantiation is not a greater perversion of the Lord's Supper than is the burial theory a perversion of baptism. When immersionists abandon this theory, then they will be in harmony with the simplicity of the gospel.

Rev. James M. Chaney
Lexington, Missouri
1877



DOMESTIC PEACE

ON A BRIGHT SUMMER EVENING, about the middle of June, as Pastor Cowan was sitting with his wife on their front porch, William Meadows, a promising young lawyer, passed by very leisurely, as if enjoying an evening walk. As the young man reached the gate he seemed, to Pastor Cowan, to indicate a tentative desire to stop—but politely nodding and waving, he passed on. In a few minutes the lawyer returned, and at the gate he repeated these same motions. About fifteen minutes later, Pastor Cowan and his wife saw him again, returning at a more determined and somewhat quicker pace. But his speed slackened as he approached, and after a hasty glance in their direction he turned away toward the opposite side of the street. Then, seeing a friend, William casually crossed the street and began talking with him.

The young man's movements had attracted Pastor Cowan's attention, and he determined to watch and wait. In about ten minutes Mrs. Cowan went inside to see to dinner, and no sooner had she gone than

William hurried across the street to where Pastor Cowan was sitting. The reason for his behavior was soon explained: he wished for Pastor Cowan to attend his marriage, the following week, to Dora Goodling, a young lady who was an active member of Pastor Cowan's church.

Pastor Cowan could not say he was surprised, having already heard speculations about this marriage, and he was neither pleased nor displeased with the announcement. His indifference was not due to anything he knew about his young friend Dora, nor to what he had heard of the young man. William was about twenty-four and from an excellent family. He had obvious intellectual abilities and had graduated with highest honors from one of the best colleges in the country. After that he had attended law school and was now well established in his profession.

But Dora was a Presbyterian, abounding "in every good work" (2 Cor. 9:8), and a most useful member of Pastor Cowan's church. William, by contrast, was a zealous Baptist, though not actually a member of his Baptist church. He was always prepared to argue for the doctrine and its peculiarities, sometimes to a disagreeable extent. Once, at the age of fourteen, he had defended his position in a public discussion on the subject of baptism. Even when others had lost their interest and dropped the discussion, young William's zeal seemed to grow stronger. His passion had given him such a reputation as a defender of Baptist principles that he was commonly known as "William the Baptist." He accepted the nickname as a reward for his youthful fervor. The title stayed with him to such a degree that even in college his professors had also called him "William the Baptist." Even through law school he was known by the nickname.

Regardless, the following week as scheduled, William and Dora were joined as husband and wife, in the sight of God and at the house of a friend. As Pastor Cowan left the wedding, he wondered what sort of life awaited them—she an intelligent,

devoted Presbyterian; he, while not yet a member of his church, in principle a zealous Baptist. Pastor Cowan remembered the old question, “Can two walk together except they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3 KJV). There was, humanly speaking, no hope that William would ever join the Presbyterian church, and presumably little chance that Dora would ever consent to become a Baptist.

It seemed that Dora guessed Pastor Cowan’s reservations, because two weeks after the wedding she called on him and quickly introduced the subject.

DORA: I’m sure you are curious to know how William and I, with such different beliefs, expect to get along as husband and wife.

PASTOR COWAN: I admit it’s been a great concern to me. But it is possible, if you both agree to disagree.

DORA: And that is what we’ve agreed to do. We discussed it before we got married and agreed not to talk about our differences.

PASTOR COWAN: That should be feasible, as long as both of you can keep to that agreement. But you will find your domestic peace threatened by bitterness and jealousy if you ever decide to pursue your doctrinal differences.

DORA: Don’t worry—I’ve never discussed these issues with anyone, and I have no desire to bring them up with William. I know the arguments this would bring about, and that nothing will change William’s beliefs anyway.

Pastor Cowan prayed with Dora before she left, earnestly asking God to bless their marriage and give them a long and happy life together. The couple lived in a house not far from the church, and Pastor and Mrs. Cowan saw Dora almost every day. She continued to attend their church regularly, and William usually accompanied her. Weeks passed, and no couple seemed happier.